The Hunger of Gods

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The Hunger of Gods

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Summary

A Lovecraftian AU borrowing elements of backstory from A Study in Emerald.

Nine hundred years ago the Great Old Ones returned, and since then humanity has been their pawns and playthings. For years Will Graham counted himself lucky to have escaped their notice, but that was before he met Hannibal; a God masquerading as a harmless thin-blood, one of the mostly human descendants of the Gods. Now he has been chosen for a role he never wanted, in a plan he does not understand.

And caught in dim glimpses of the future, something is coming.

Chapter 1

One would think the death of a God would shatter the world, or at least that part of it which contains those who were there to witness the fall. Yet Will wakes, walks, goes about his business and the world continues on. It has not changed. Only he has changed, perceiving the truth behind the lies, the curtain drawn back revealing the secret horror. Knowledge has a weight like a collar round his neck. There is not one there yet – but no physical reminder is needed, and although he is claimed, Hannibal himself remains oddly enamoured by the shadows. He keeps his secrets close. He is True-Blood Royal, and yet he maintains this facade of the ordinary. Will would not dare look deep enough into him to find out why.

In the immediate aftermath, Will is left alone. In fire and fury at the close of battle he had lost all track of space and time whilst enveloped in darkness and god-stuff, and then had been spat forth in his own home with only his mutts for company. There had been no sign or word from Abigail or Hannibal since. He can feel them though, the God's attention from afar, a watchful eye beyond the world. Abigail is drawn in to him now, becoming a part of him. The very thought makes Will's skin crawl and shudder. It is what is wanted for him, he knows. He also knows there is no hope for escape. What he had always feared is come, and if not to be devoured all at once, then to be made a plaything, which is in some ways worse for there will be no promise of an end beyond the torment.

As Hannibal promised, he cannot speak of it. His tongue is a leaden weight, his throat closing in pained spasms. Will returns to his work for Jack Crawford because he can think of little else he might do. If Hannibal does not mean to do anything to him in the immediate moment, then life – as banal as it is – must go on. His dogs must be fed. He must be fed, despite the temptation to let himself waste away to bones and dust. But that would not be allowed, Will is sure. As Toviyah returned him ever to health, sustaining him with his power, so would Hannibal do the same. There is no escape in that or any other way.

Their team is called at one point when Dr Chilton, Head of the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane, is found dead in the same place the Chesapeake Ripper once left the arm of Jack's trainee Lass to be discovered. Will knows who Jack suspects, but in the end his own particular skills are not needed – Abel Gideon is missing from his cell, the bars wrenched and twisted asunder by some outside force, and when the area around the observatory is searched, his sucked-dry corpse is found strung up in the forest nearby all in pieces, flayed and butchered. The Ripper has ripped, sure enough, but he has left as little to be found as before. No psychic spoor here for Will Graham's mind to latch on to, gnaw at, metabolise and digest.

Jack is displeased, as he always is, but the team to whom Will was never close are now farther away then ever, as though a wall of glass has shut him off from the world, and much as he beats against it, shouts and screams and pleads, it cannot be broken, and he cannot be heard.

Will dreams of water and he dreams of fire. He dreams of a beach, air so cold his breath steams and the waves that roll and break against the sand are slush beaded with larger chunks of ice. Hoarfrost coats the sparse dead trees which become a thicket of thorns preventing his

escape from the shoreline. Beyond the ocean is a wall of ice that leaks rust-red blood, and behind it the promise of a flood. It creaks. Pieces splinter. The sense of something coming, lurking on the edge of potentiality, makes the air thick and hard to breath. But it never comes, or not before he wakes. Of the fire he has only flashes.

After that, there is quiet for some time. There are no killings which would occasion a need for his skills. Will returns to teaching, to lecturing, letting the familiar shadows and whispers of the Quantico building surround him, a blanket over the glass. The eager minds of his students are almost refreshing, compared to the horrors he has seen. After Toviyah he had been thin, each rib showing stark through his skin, a web of white scars over his chest and limbs. His appetite is poor, but he has been filling out again and the scars are starting to fade. His nightmares have never included re-enactments of what was done to him, but he has his suspicions as to the cause of that – he doubts the God that has claimed him wants any reminder that another put their mark on him.

Things cannot last as they are. The space, the time he has been given to self-stabilise is a small mercy and only that. Before many more days have passed, one evening Will is startled from his thoughts by a knock at his door. He rises, and notes that his dogs are milling around, confused, perhaps a little scared but not knowing why. He steels himself, already sure what is coming.

Hannibal, wearing his thin-blood guise, is standing on the porch. He is wrapped up against the cold in a thick wool coat, and he has Abigail with him. He smiles, showing the hint of sharp teeth. Will can sense the amusement pouring off him.

“Good evening,” the God says. “I wonder, have you decided which path you will take towards the future?”

Will grits his teeth. He had been defiant before, letting his tongue loose with anger and hate, and although the God had allowed it then, he may be less lenient now. It is not in the nature of Royalty to let their servants and slaves answer back. “What do you want?” he asks, the words bitter in his mouth.

“You have lingered in your misery long enough,” Hannibal tells him. “You are mine, and there are certain standards which I expect you to uphold. There is much to teach you.”

“There's a lot of things humans aren't meant to know – I'm not foolish enough to drive myself out of my mind,” Will says.

“You were just given permission,” Abigail says, rolling her eyes. She looks... much as she ever has. No changes lurk beneath her pale skin, no subtle wrongness makes itself manifest in her features. Her eyes are older than her age, for she has seen much that ought have been spared her, much that Will would have spared her, if he could. Hannibal's power has caged her, but not warped her, at least not yet. How long can that last? Mortals are not meant to dwell with the Gods.

“Come with me Will,” Hannibal says, holding his hand out to him. “Come and know. You were always one to prefer that to the ignorance of the common flock. You are meant for more than they are.”

Will has no choice. The asking is an illusion of it, but only that. He reaches for his jacket hanging by the door and steps out into the cold of night, with the smell of snow sharp on the air. Hannibal smiles at him again, fond in a way that makes his skin shudder. The warm wool is little protection against the less natural types of chill.

Will takes the hand that is offered him, and Abigail reaches for the other. Around them the world blurs. The moon jumps in the sky and the stars recede to be barely glimpsed. The trees, sparse and bare, take on a wilder aspect, twigs and branches intertwining, growing, grasping. His house behind him is gone, leaving only a trail under their feet.

“Where are we?” he asks. If the point of this is knowledge, then he must be permitted his questions.

“Our destination is the Dreamlands,” Hannibal tells him. He too is changed. Not as far as his true form, that massive, incoherent bulk of shadows, blue flame and sharp-boned limbs, but his skin has taken on that dull deep-sea hue, his crown of antlers rises tall, his fingers become claws long and razored. His teeth are layers of needles behind the mask of his mouth. “This is our entrance to it. We are here to visit friends.”

“Gods don't have friends. They only have acquaintances they haven't killed yet.”

Hannibal concedes this with a slight incline of his head. “Perhaps then I should say allies? At least, we have need of a guide to lead us to a certain individual, for although he is known to me, his location is not. We shall give them our goodwill that we might expect it in return.”

“Why do they know if you don't?” Will asks. Abigail frowns at him.

“The Dreamlands are vast Will,” Hannibal says, soft as a whisper, as a murmur on the edge of hearing. “Vast beyond measure even of my kind. That part of it which is tied to your world has become far stranger since we returned. Gone is the peace which came before – this is a wilder land than it was, and more changeable. Its inhabitants must move and change with it, else be lost.”

“I feel as though I've been here before,” Abigail says.

“You have. This place is mine – a shadow's breadth apart from the Dreamlands. And where I am, so is all that belongs to me.”

“Who are we going to see then?” Will asks through gritted teeth, desperate suddenly to talk of anything else.

Hannibal walks forwards and the woods warp around him. The stars shudder. When Will looks up a new sky has usurped the old, a sky in motion, where the shapes of unfamiliar constellations chase each other across a wet sea of whispering ink. There are no clouds here; there were none before.

“We seek the carrion-eaters,” the God tells them. “For the lost cannot lose themselves any further.”

From the forest they descend a deer-path through the tangled trees and then out into an open valley where long grasses black in the star light ripple in a breeze that only the stalks can feel. There is no moon and nor are the stars bright, yet it is as easy for Will to see the valley laid out below him as if it were high-noon in summer. A shudder runs through him. If he only had a mirror he could check... he had felt nothing, but that did not mean that no touch unseen could not have altered him, remade his eyes for the God's convenience.

But it is better not to know. They have come here questing, and Will would rather this experience be done with as soon as it can be.

The valley is wide, and leads down to a village over rivers and bridges. Hills to each side become mountains of bare and barren rock, and there this unnatural sight seems to fail him as darkness takes them and swallows them, and they become one with the well of the sky. Will looks up again, and for a moment he feels the cold kiss of snow. Then it is gone, as swiftly as it came, and he is left feeling that the void above him is really below, and so wide and vast and deep that it is as though he is about to fall into it.

Claws close around his throat. “Take care,” Hannibal says, the clotted-blood pools of his eyes moving in between Will and the stars and catching him in their just-as-deep gaze. “Do not stray.”

Will nods silently. The claws loosen, and the God turns away once more. “Follow.”

Abigail elbows him as the side as she obeys, rolling her eyes at him. “Aren't you the one who was talking about taking care of your own mind?” she says under her breath. He cannot answer that. It had been foolish, but he hadn't thought... hadn't realised. Not really. What being here meant. These are the Dreamlands, and here the unreal can become real as easy as taking a breath.

He follows Abigail who follows Hannibal. The path they take is little but earth and dust, as though worn smooth from the fields by the passing of many feet, even though these lands seem almost deserted. No smoke rises from the chimneys of the village below. No lights are in its windows. No movement in its streets. At first it seems that the road they take will lead there, but instead it turns aside and around, marking a loop over the hills towards an ancient high wall of crumbling stone. A low arch leads through it, and beyond... a graveyard. There are pillars and mausoleums, marble and granite, shadowed statues of creatures he does not know and does not think he wants to. The earth is torn up in many places and shattered wood and sundered lead speak of desecration. Abigail hums; a thoughtful sound.

“Claimed of the Charnel God,” she says, offering this up in the way of an objection or some potential obstacle.

“Yet it is not his favour we come asking today,” Hannibal replies. “Their simple knowledge will suffice.”

Simple or not, this is knowledge Will wants no part in. He is human, mortal, and this... this is not for him. Those who go to the Dreamlands do not come back the same. Those touched by Gods do not come back the same. He is happy with how he is – though that's not something he would have ever thought he'd say. But he is already marked; the scars of a God's claws

itch on his flesh. A part of a God lay nestled under his ribs for months. He has forgotten none of this, nor the anger that bubbles within him whenever he thinks of it.

“What now?” he asks, the ghost of his wrath spurring his tongue.

Hannibal inclines his head in the direction of a mausoleum at the centre of the bone-yard. Its wide door looms open and empty and steps lead down and in. Then there is movement. A lithe grey figure, not human in its skin or movement, scurries up the steps towards them. It creeps forwards on both two limbs and four, and comes to a stop crouched in a kind of bow. It does look half-way human, but the head is more like a dog and its hands are clawed.

“You know my name,” Hannibal tells it. He is a monstrous, regal shadow in the un-light, a shadow before which this creature pays homage.

“Yes, oh God,” comes the reply. The voice is high and thin, shaping the words oddly in the manner of one who is used to a very different language. “Come, come within, come to the low places, our tunnels are open to you.” It rises and scampers away towards the maw of the crypt, towards the deep darkness. Hannibal follows it, Abigail trailing after him. Will hesitates, but the only thing worse than venturing into the gape of that hole would be to remain above alone. He has better control of the curse of his peculiar mind than he once did, but he does not fool himself – in this place he makes a tempting target for hungry predators. Hannibal, Royal as he may be, at least has an interest in seeing him kept alive.

The stairs that lead to the mausoleum are damp and slick with some indefinable moisture. As Will passes beneath the threshold a rush of clammy, chill air hits his skin, making it prickle. He shivers. The smell here is that of the grave, sickly rot that as of yet is merely a slight perfume on the air. He suspects that as they delve deeper it will become much worse.

Whatever trick of sight let him see in the night above fails him in this world below. Shadows swallow him up and the expanse of his existence is quickly reduced to only his own breath, the movement of his lungs in his chest, the stumbling of his feet over the rough stone. He puts out a hand and his fingers brush against the wetness of a wall. Still the stairs descend, making him hesitant.

“Take my hand,” Abigail says, from but a little way in front of him. Will reaches out and she grasps his wrist, and then he can see again, in much the way as he could in the lands above. “I think it'll be a long walk.”

“How...” Will starts to ask, and she raises her other arm to show the dark tendril wrapped around it, seeming somehow to bite into the very flesh. He does not have to look to see where the other end of it leads. Hannibal looms only a little way ahead of them, looking back with eyes that seem to glow to this alien and borrowed sight. Instinct makes him jerk away, but Abigail's grip is stronger than an unthinking reaction, and she rolls her eyes at him.

“You're wasting time,” she says, and tugs at him to urge him on.

The stairs become a spiral as they descend, widening out into a vast chasm above and below. Here and there other paths come down to meet theirs or rise up away to vanish into the rock, but as far as can be seen they are all alone here in the depths. No other creatures like their

guide seem to traverse these routes, but then Will can feel the fear that pours from this one, sweaty and salty, bitter as vinegar against the back of his tongue, even though he's not particularly trying to get inside its head. When a God walks, best get out of the way.

By the time they reach the bottom of the cavern it seems as though they have been walking for hours, although if that were the case then Will thinks he ought to be more tired than he is. There is no burn in his muscles even though he has been moving ceaselessly all this while. Yet Abigail does not seem to find anything odd about this, and he suspects that the reason for is the kind of knowledge that she has been gifted, and that he himself has been promised were he only to bow his head to the creature that has claimed him.

He will not. Knowing does not matter as much to him as his life and his mind, and those he will keep safe as well as he can, even if the effort can only be futile in the end.

Their guide leads them on over the rough surface of the cave to a high opening in one wall, where the surroundings become less the work of nature and more the work of a guiding mind and clever hands. There are tall pillars, and doorways cut into the rock at many heights so that that the new cavern which they pass into seems to be holed with burrows as if it were some great termite-mound. A low sussurus of conversation in some whistling, meeping tongue fills the air, but ceases quickly as they pass into view. A few grey-green creatures which had been gathered in the large open space leap away back to their homes; others simply freeze silent in place.

“I wish to speak to one who knows of the uplands,” Hannibal tells their guide.

“There is one among us who came from the lands above,” the creature replies. “She resides nearby.”

“Huh,” Abigail says thoughtfully, catching Will's attention.

“What is it?” he asks.

“If you weren't so stubborn you'd already know,” she tells him. “There's really nothing to be afraid of.”

She looks so certain and self-assured that Will cannot find it in him to argue with her. He will not move her; she has been too long in the God's influence. Abigail is lost, and although he has tried very hard not to think on it too much, he can't help but blame himself for this at least a little. If he had been more perceptive, if he had paid more attention to the way he had always felt a little bit off around Hannibal then... but what would he have done then even if he had known? What way does he really think he could have stopped any of this? It was already too late from the very first time he met the God in Jack's office.

Abigail makes an annoyed noise when she sees that he isn't about to make any reply to her, and tugs at his wrist harder than necessary as they head off again in search of this person from the uplands who it seems can tell them what they know.

Said person turns out to be a young girl in her twenties, more human in appearance than the rest of the inhabitants of this underworld, although altered in a way that speaks of something

eldrich back in her blood-line. Will doesn't know that he could call her a thin-blood exactly. This seems like something else. A transformation brought on by a kind of background radiation of wyrd, of Godly presence. In a way it is what he fears will happen to him, will happen to Abigail, if the pair of them spend any significant amount of time in Hannibal's presence. She is introduced as Georgia Madchen, a pale youth with yellowed skin, a little plump with grave-gas, skin peeling in rents of greater or lesser size to reveal muscle in some places and in others the greyish flesh of her compatriots. Her eyes have yellow irises ringed with red. Her clothes are tattered and grimy odds and ends, worn with decay. When she is introduced to Hannibal, she bows in the way that mortals are trained to do.

“Of course whatever you need I'll help with,” she tells them. “But my memory isn't the best these days, not when it comes to my life up there.”

“That life is like a dream to you now, I understand,” Hannibal says, his voice a low rumble that might be soothing – had once been soothing – if only Will didn't know what he is. “You wish to forget the events that drove you to seek out this place and your mind obliges you. To consider a return to the world above is painful to you, but I must ask this of you.”

“What are you looking for anyway that you can't find yourself?”

“A certain individual that I have cause to believe you once knew. An acquaintance of mine in a distant past. He may have been known to you as Sutcliffe.”

A look of fear seems to come into her eyes. She hesitates. Will could reach out and read her, open his mind to hers and see, but he does not wish to. Not here, in the dark and the depths and the dreaming.

“I know him,” she says in a whisper. “I... remember knowing him.”

Hannibal does not move, yet somehow seems to loom all the same. “Then you can take us to him.”

It makes for another long and difficult journey. Will has cause to wish that the God in their midst might at least use some of the power of that Royal blood to carve a smooth and easy way through the tangles of space and time to save them the trip. A quick path, even so tainted, would be less harrowing than the sickening weight of the vast spaces beneath the earth, the empty wastes whose heights or depths cannot be seen, where unknown things chatter and shriek from far away and even peaks that would be called mountains had they sky above them have space to rear their bare and sharp-edged heads. Eyes follow them, tracking their movement with impersonal and implacable concentration, like predators picking the weak members from a herd. Even if Will knows in the abstract that he is safe from them in Hannibal's presence, this means little to the mortal prey-instincts of his body.

But there is no easy route. If he does not know all that they might wish him to, at least he knows that on occasion even power cannot match the twisted path correctly followed.

Abigail seems oblivious to it all. He envies her that much. She has joined Georgia at the head of their small procession, falling into step with her and making conversation. He can make out only about half of it, but it gives him something to focus on rather than those sounds upon the edge of hearing.

“I don't think anyone should fear what they are,” Abigail tells the girl, “or what they're chosen to be.”

“I had family though, up there,” Georgia replies. She sounds wistful. “But even though I know they loved me, when I told them... when they saw that it was true...”

“Change can be scary,” Abigail says, looking back at Will to make a point. He ignores it. “But if you hadn't, would you really have been happy?”

“If I could have had both, I would have,” Georgia says. “But I couldn't hold back the hunger, or what was going on under my skin when I gave into it. How can someone who hasn't felt that understand it? *I* didn't understand it, not at first. That's how I met Dr Sutcliffe, you see. He was meant to fix what was wrong with me. He didn't, couldn't. He told me what was going on, what I was becoming, but he didn't do it to help. He did it because he saw me as a thing, as a specimen for him to observe and experiment on.”

“We might be seeking him out for answers, but Hannibal's not going to let him try something like that,” Abigail replies. Will is liking the sound of this less and less. The God would not have him here without purpose, and people like this man are just another of his deep fears. People who will look at him and say, isn't he *interesting*. Let's get inside his head and see what makes it work. Even if this Sutcliffe is a mortal rather than one of the Blood, the urge is the same, and the lengths they will go to.

But they have brought him too far to make any escape. He must trust – as if a God knows anything of trust! - that Abigail's words are the truth, and that Hannibal does not want him damaged in the search for whatever this knowledge might be.

They emerge at last into the light of day – a light blinding in its suddenness and intensity, after the long dark of the deeps. Will rises, blinking, from the stair that emerges in the midst of a circle of stones, worn with long ages past the memory of his own kind. Hannibal makes a low, satisfied noise that might almost be a purr. His sea-deep hide glistens like an oil-slick beneath a cold sun. Not that it is the cold of winter, but perhaps some far-north summer where even an endless day cannot truly deliver warmth.

The land about them is sand and stone; the worn-down remains of some great city swallowed up by the desert. A little way off, one building yet remains whole, some dark temple standing tall against the blue horizon. Georgia Madchen gestures towards it.

“You'll find him in there,” she says. “But if you'll allow it, Royal One, I'd rather not go any further. This isn't my world any more.”

Hannibal nods. “You may return below. I have no desire to cause you distress.”

With a shy glance towards Abigail, Georgia turns back down the stairs and is swallowed in stygian gloom once more.

And so onwards, Will thinks, and follows like a leashed dog as the God leads the way.

Inside, it is warm and the air is perfumed with the scent of rose and ancient books. It is silent and still, dry in the way of dead things. From the high hall that is the entrance chamber, tall stairs rise up into darkness, leading to floors and rooms unknown. Although it has all the appearance of a temple, there is no altar and no idol, only tall thin pillars that fatten out near the floor like drops of fossilised water, and hanging banners of white sheer linen suspended motionless between them. Hannibal takes them up through corridors to a floor where every wall is carved with shelves for books, scrolls, parchment, vellum, papyrus... here is knowledge, in this secret, half-sacred place. Will can feel the power of it weighing down the world itself around them.

Faintly, somewhere, someone is whistling. The tune of it is lost at first in between the thickness of stone walls and heavy, dead air, but as they draw nearer to this sign of life it begins to resolve into something of meaning. Not that Will recognises it, but at least it sounds like real music, which is more than he might have expected.

The whistler is finally revealed when they come out into one of the upper rooms of the library, where the corridor suddenly opens up into a space filled with tables of all kinds, piled high with relics and trinkets under half-fogged glass. The man is unremarkable at first glance, neither tall nor short, neither fat nor thin, a receding hairline above a nearly trimmed beard of auburn flecked with grey. He sits reading with such deep concentration that he does not notice their arrival; some feat given that Hannibal is not performing his usual trick of hiding the presence his bloodline gives him. He looks up when the God coughs politely, and goes very still. Then he removes the pair of old-fashioned pince-nez and sets them down with a click of metal on wood that is very loud in the silence.

“Yours is a face I did not think I would ever see again,” the man says, addressing the God.

Hannibal smiles. It is one of his smiles where Will can feel the threat simmering under the surface, but not in a way that promises anything imminent, merely conveying the awareness that it is there, to become manifest were anything displeasing to happen.

“It was indeed in another life for both of us,” the God replies.

“How did you find me?” the man – Sutcliffe – asks wearily. “I chose this place with very particular criteria in mind.”

“My kind are not easily kept away. We have the leisure of the endless expanse of time to find what we seek – as does your own kin.”

“As we *used* to. Ever since you changed the stars and stopped this planet in its tracks...”

“Does it really mean so much to the race of Yith?” Hannibal asks. It's a therapist's question, the kind to which he already knows the answer and merely wishes to see which way you will cut yourself when trying to retreat from its sharp point. Will recognises those very well. “You have traversed your minds across the gulfs of space before.”

“We had a very coherent plan for the continuation of our civilisation. If my people have managed to formulate another one then I cannot know of it. The walls you have built in time will not let me return from this host body.”

“But nor will you perish here.”

“I thought there was an understanding between yours and mine. Yith-kind have always been respectful, have we not, and yet...”

“The Yith do not have any claim on this system,” Hannibal says, his voice cold and hard and flat. Well, isn't that always Royalty's position? We'll do what we want with our property – by which we mean you – and you'll just have to put up with it. Will is not about to feel sorry for whatever this thing is that's wearing a stolen human shape.

Sutcliffe looks away, thinking better of whatever reply he might have thought to make. “What reason did you have for seeking me out, anyway?” he asks, changing the topic with all the deftness and subtlety of an ocean liner coming into dock.

“To ask your opinion on a topic regarding which you have a particular expertise.”

“Something to do with one of these humans,” Sutcliffe says, seeming to notice Will and Abigail for the first time. “I don't recall you being one for disciples.”

“This is Will Graham,” Hannibal says. “He is the bearer of some very particular gifts which are not precisely as one would expect to find in a mortal. It began with a simple empathy; an unusual flexibility in his thinking which allows him to view the world through the eyes of another, work his way between the cracks of their mind, even if that mind is as alien as that of a thin-blood. However even when I first met him I knew that there was the potential for more. I had intended to coax this out very gradually, but a confluence of events led to an outcome so unlikely that I had not even looked down its path into the future.”

It grates to be talked about in this way, as though he isn't even in the room, but Will isn't going to say anything. Even if he thought that was a good idea or that objecting would actually work, he has to admit to a certain amount of curiosity. What Hannibal says about his capabilities here is more likely to be the truth of what he thinks than anything he has said thus far in what might laughably be called their therapy sessions.

“A physical ailment was one of the elements,” Hannibal continues. “Auto-immune encephalitis. The scent of it clung to him like smoke rising from a fire; a fevered sweetness. I soothed it with an eidolon of my blood placed in his flesh to seep the heat. Then came the day that he chose to look into the mind of a God. His mind was tinder awaiting that spark. It awoke.”

What? Will doesn't allow himself to react, but that isn't easy. Encephalitis? There hadn't been any sign of illness; he hadn't felt unusually tired or in the grip of some unfamiliar malaise. But to make up this kind of fabrication... he cannot see any reason to do so. Hannibal wouldn't gain anything by it. So it must be at least something like the truth.

“It is not unknown for the rare human to have some psychic abilities,” Sutcliffe points out.

“It remains a possibility that that is all this is,” the God says. “And that Will simply has a particularly strong talent to accompany his pleasing penchant for blood-shed. However perhaps you will oblige me by considering all the options for yourself.”

Sutcliffe stands up, looking at Will in a thoughtful and analytic manner that makes his skin crawl.

“At least doing this favour might potentially be interesting,” he says to himself.

Chapter 2

Sutcliffe doesn't *do* anything to him at first. No, initially he merely positions him on some particular patch of floor whilst he goes from shelf to shelf picking up books and muttering to himself, either putting them back or adding them to the growing pile in his arms. Then he returns to his reading table and starts pouring through them, pince-nez back in place, taking notes with a quill pen as he goes. Will looks towards Hannibal for some kind of input on the situation, but the God has taken on his beastly true form and curled up in a shaft of light filtering down from a gap in the roof overhead to watch proceedings with predatory patience. However long this might end up taking, a long wait is not something that would concern one of the Blood.

Abigail however is already looking bored.

“Hey,” she says after a while. “Hey!”

Sutcliffe looks up, annoyed. “What is it?”

“Would it be alright if I went off and explored this place?” she asks. “There's nothing here that might try and eat me, I mean?”

“No, I'm the only one here,” Sutcliffe replies. “And if it will stop you from interrupting me again when I'm trying to think, then do whatever you want. I would instruct you not to read the books, but I doubt you're likely to listen to *me*, and I very much doubt you understand the languages they are written in, so.” He waves his hand dismissively at her. She rolls her eyes and leaves.

Will has a suspicion that the expression Hannibal is wearing right now is amusement.

After a while he begins to wish he had Abigail's freedom, as he certainly isn't immune to boredom, and his feet are beginning to ache from standing in one place for so long. He is hesitant to speak up, because to be frank the less he associates with creatures such as these the better in his mind, but eventually he will have to say something if only to keep from falling over. It has been a long... well he can't exactly call it a day, or a night, and he has the feeling that in the Dreamlands time is somewhat more malleable that it usually is... but it has been a long while since he last sat down. But he is saved from interrupting the silence when Sutcliffe stands up suddenly.

“I have some preliminary ideas now,” the man – or whatever sort of creature a Yith might be – says.

“I trust the testing of them will result in no damage to what's mine,” Hannibal says. Sutcliffe looks nervous, an entirely appropriate response.

“It shouldn't,” he replies. “Of course you are more than welcome to observe my procedures.” As if there had ever been a question of *that,* Will thinks.

Sutcliffe leads the way through the temple-library to another room which is full of strange mechanisms, bubbling glasses and flasks containing mysterious liquids, and the occasional spit and crackle of arcs of electricity between the poles of some or other device. All in all there is a lot about the place that calls the labs of Quantico to his mind, and Will cannot deny that the superficial similarity is a little comforting. What he wouldn't give to be back there, to watch Price, Zzzeller and Beverly hard at work, wrapped up in their tasks and leaving him an eternal observer – better that observer than the one who's about to be dissected – metaphorically – on the table.

Sutcliffe indicates that he should seat himself in a chair by one of the tables, and Will hesitates, but obeys. There is a curious sort of instrument on the worn surface; all rods and wires and mirrors, gleaming hints of copper tainting a hundred reflections which seem to lead far deeper than they should. There is no visible power source, yet the whole thing is alive and buzzing with energy. Sutcliffe begins unspooling cables and attaching them in complicated ways to a kind of loose mesh helmet. Will has his suspicions about who will be wearing it, suspicions quickly borne out as the Yith – Yithian?- places it with a certain amount of care on Will's head. It catches and pulls at his hair.

“In ideal circumstances there would be neither hair, skin or skull in the way,” Sutcliffe says, mostly to himself, adjusting the fit. Will does his best not to move, nervous of potential consequences. He tries not to imagine it; his own brain in a jar somewhere, wrapped in wire. He can't stop himself from gritting his teeth in the constant expectation of future pain, and his jaw is starting to ache. He'll have a headache from doing it soon, although that could be the least of his worries when it comes to that part of his body.

Sutcliffe fiddles with his machine. Fat green sparks jump, and there is something like movement that catches the corner of Will's eye, something shifting illusory in the heart of the mirrors, easily dismissed as a trick of the mind if only it didn't repeat itself again and again...

“Perhaps this...” Sutcliffe says, and then Will is somewhere very far away.

He's standing on bare rock. It is too bright for this to be night, but he can see the stars overhead... unfamiliar stars. That should not be possible. There are only the God's stars, but... this would not be the first time his mind took him away from Earth. He hasn't thought of that vision since... since it happened. Since the cave, the terror, the truth, and all that meant. A shiver wracks through him, full-bodied, although it is not cold here.

Where is here? Will turns, hoping to see...

The sky is full of light. Not the light of a sun, white-yellow and steady, no this is ribbons of colour as far as the eye can see, a thousand fireworks fixed and made permanent, shifting slowly though space as though a faint breeze sways the tendrils back and forth, all purple and green and gold and *radiant*. He cannot look away. He has never seen anything like this before.

“Hey, you!” A man's voice, raised in irritation. Will manages to tear himself away from the display above to see a tall thin man – or what looks like a man – in his mid-fifties. His hair is greying and slightly curly, and he has a face which looks like fury is its default expression.

He's wearing a navy blue jacket with a crimson lining. “Yes you, you stupid ape, what are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here!”

Not a man then. Something else, and the more Will looks at him, the more he can sense something vast and dangerous curled up behind this mortal shell, in just the way Hannibal hides what he is in the person-suit he has carefully constructed.

“Some people just do things without thinking,” what is probably a God says to itself under its breath, striding towards him in a movement which does not look entirely natural. “Not that that lot are even *capable* of thinking in these dimensions...”

A long-fingered hand touches Will's forehead and he is back in the temple, blinking. Sutcliffe looks at him warily, with cool and calculating intelligence.

“Interesting.”

“Tell me Will, where did you go?” Hannibal asks softly.

“I don't...” he coughs, his throat dry. “I don't know.”

“His mind is certainly connected to *something,*” Sutcliffe says, “but I have no idea what. Although there may be other tests...”

Hannibal nods his assent. Will says nothing, merely allows himself to be pulled around to various other instruments which he must grip, or spit into, or stare at, or various other seemingly meaningless things, but whatever the Yith does it doesn't seem to be giving him any answers. At first this appears to irritate him, then alarm him. Finally the God who has been watching all this with curiosity bids him enough.

“No further answers will be gleaned here, from your avenues of inquiry,” he says. “I thank you for your time, and if we have need of you again Sutcliffe, we will return. I know the way now.”

This does not make Sutcliffe look any happier. He had thought himself safe here in the sanctuary he had found or created for himself, and that was no more than an illusion; one which Hannibal has now shattered. Will feels no sympathy. There is no safety in this world for him, and so he cannot bring himself to care that the same is true for creatures utterly unlike him.

“Let us see where Abigail has taken herself off to,” Hannibal says, and takes Will away through the winding and desolate corridors, with home their eventual, promised destination.

Satisfaction is confluence and convergence of plans, or myriad influences that coalesce into the now and set in stone the rope of time and happenings as the God Himself desires. Hannibal is satisfied. Priestess offers praises in his name, Priest gives curses in secret parts of soul no less treasured. Hate is love mirrored; traverse the ouroborus, one becomes the other.

Futures flicker in vision held in hands like jumping cards that pass from one to other, mix and mix in endless shuffle to be viewed. Viewing is not altering, must pluck one forth to read deep enough to see what might be done to change the picture writ thereon. That which he sees is good, yet over all the self-same shadow falls that once was seen eons before, threat and promise drawn out by show of power and glory; that triumph over other, sharp-metalled God in depthless pits of that other's domain. Won him servants but must make them strong for trials that path of future promises.

Bedelia warned him thus, promised old enemy would come. Had not told her such was his aim, to show his pattern wide to those with eyes to see, eyes fixed close for trail or taste of him, for reaching jaws and tongue and hunger. Strength enough recovered with God and Godling power in stomach digested, become his own to fuel his rage. This time the cost will not be own to bear, shall come from other's hide torn loose and tattered all to shreds. Thus taking back what is his and once was lost, shall be God Victorious and leave no element of That Which Is not fit unto his sight.

And now a gift to dearest Will, who feigns lack of lust for learning yet whose own brain cannot but thirst to know and put forth power in the getting of it.

Will doesn't see Hannibal or Abigail again for some time after the trip to the Dreamlands. He is left alone once more, and he wonders if this is to be the pattern of their interactions now; to be ignored – as is preferable – until some need or necessity comes along and the God decides to rope him in to whatever endeavour he has in mind. If that is to be the way of things then it is better than he might have hoped. Not that he can kid himself that this is because he isn't that interesting.

One morning he opens the door to find a package left on his porch. Left, not delivered – there's no stamp or postmark on it anywhere he can see. It's just a simple rectangle about the size and shape of a flattened brick, wrapped in heavy brown paper with neatness and precision. Clustered in their pack behind him, his dogs growl furiously, backing away. Will can sense it too; whatever it is exudes a powerful aura of malevolence, an instinctual wrongness that he need not open his mind to feel. It is tainted with eldrich energies.

There's only one being who could have put this here. It's a gift or meant as one, although that's a wide and ambiguous definition when it comes to Royalty. There is no part of Will that wants to touch it, but he's going to have to even if it is only to dispose of it. Does he dare dispose of it? Will it even burn, whatever it is?

Slowly he crouches and reaches out a hand. The very air seems to grow thick around the object, repelling him. Or perhaps that is just the psychological effects of whatever horror lurks inside that unassuming wrapping paper. Will steels himself and picks it up.

It doesn't feel as bad, once it's in his hands. There’s a warmth that seeps through the paper even thick as it is, as though the thing within is as good as alive. If he presses his palm flat against it he can almost imagine a tiny heartbeat fluttering against his skin. He takes it inside and puts it down on the table he uses for making his fishing-flies. It sits there, all

unassuming, in the wan light streaming in from the wide windows while he gathers the courage to open it up.

Will slits the string with a knife sharp as a razor. The paper tears easily, and underneath… a black book. So black it's hard to look at, as though it is drawing all about it inwards, warping and wrapping the world around it with a weight that is not of this dimension. He becomes aware of his own breathing as something rattling in his throat; his fear instinctive. He knows, or at least thinks he knows, what this is, and it shouldn't be here. Not even merely in the sense that it is a thing of Royalty, but that it is something constrained and forbidden that only a very few are even permitted to own.

His hand reaches out of its own accord. He opens the cover; the strange leather is slick beneath his fingers and seems to writhe against his touch.

The Necronomicon of the Seer Al-Hazred.

Will lets it fall closed and steps away, paper hitting paper with a thud like falling stone. He was right. He didn't want to be right. He wants this thing gone, now, but how? There is no method that would destroy the book without setting free something far worse. It is Hannibal's poisoned gift - and although a God has the right to give one of these away, Hannibal is no God to the greater world, just a simple thin-blood whose name will not save Will were someone to come across this book in his home.

Eventually he settles matters by emptying the lock-box he keeps in his closet of the documents it contains and carefully pushing the book inside it with the end of a log from his woodpile. It hits the metal with a heavy thump and lies there menacingly. Will snaps the lid closed and shoves it back in the depths of the closet underneath rolls of half-used wrapping paper and an old bath-robe the dogs chewed to shreds. There. At least it is out of sight, although out of mind would require rather more effort.

He can already tell he's not going to sleep well tonight.

When Will heads into work the next morning his eyes are bloodshot and ringed with dark shadows. His nightmares had been hallucinatory and amorphous, poorly remembered in the light of day save in brief flashes that invade his mind with sudden horror and a flush of cold sweat. The knowledge of what lies hidden in his home weighs on him, fixed in the back of his mind as though impaled there. Of course no-one else knows about it, but that doesn't stop his fear of it being found out.

He is lecturing another fresh-faced group of FBI hopefuls today, and the familiarity of it all does somewhat soothe him. He doesn't have to think much about what he is saying, and so as his voice drones on Will allows his mind to wander. He half-looses himself in the psychic thrum of the building, its walls whispering softly to itself. It is talking about... he is surprised to find he can understand the words now, which has never been the case in the past, but that surprise is not enough to knock him out of his almost hypnotic state.

A new thing a new creature with weight of wards and words, symbols and scrolls and strength, new thing come new messenger, envoy, acolyte come through corridors, come to spaces, come to call and command...

“Will.”

The voice rouses him. The room is empty, the students gone. Jack is standing beneath the arch of the entrance-way with a stranger in a dark, hooded cloak behind him. Will realises that the shields of his mind, which should be so strong, are floating over the surface of his brain like gossamer on water. He has lowered them himself, allowed himself to be lulled by the familiar environment. The realisation is like a bucket of ice dropped over him. He grasps for his shields and gathers himself, bringing them up like iron walls as he has been taught.

“Caught up in quiet contemplation?” Jack asks.

“Something like that. Who's our friend?” Will indicates the hooded figure with a jerk of his head.

“I am Sssiii'ruk,” the stranger says, stepping forward and bowing slightly with hands folded in front of it. “Chosen Emissary of the Yuggya who serve Cthylla, Princess of the North.”

What answer could be made to such a statement? Royalty are numerous enough, and their strange and shifting hierarchy is in general of little concern to their mortal subjects, but everyone knows the names of those at the top of that hierarchy, the names of the absolute rulers and nobility of this continent. The Princes and Princesses are second only to He Who Presides Over The New World, He Whose Name Is Unspoken, the Yellow King himself.

Seeing that Will is not about to make any reply, Jack speaks again. “Sssiii'ruk has approached the Bureau to make use of our investigative powers,” he explains. “It seems that someone is acting in a way counter to the interests of the Princess, growing their cult and building their power without permission.”

“Naturally we have made our own enquiries,” Sssiii'ruk adds. “But alas we yet lack the name of the one involved. Their cult is termed the Order of the Great Eye, and they have been conducing a great ritual in some secret place, sacrificing humans in numbers utterly out of proportion to their station. Thus far those we have questioned have been killed by their God's bindings before revealing the location of this ritual, but we have faith that this agency may have some success by acting in ways more mundane than would be expected.”

“So naturally you sought out our team because of our success rate,” Will says, half to himself. Something which is very much a result of his own abilities. The creature nods, with a chitinous rustle. He is very glad he cannot see anything of its features in the shadows of its hood.

“We are glad of your co-operation,” Sssiii'ruk says, and melts into the shadows without another word. Jack blinks, bemused, then shrugs.

“It seems I'll be pulling you away from the classroom again,” he says. “We have our orders.”

There is little to find at first in plumbing the depths of the files that they are sent. Screams echo from the heavy parchment, but not the screams of the victims they are looking for. These are cultists caught between duty and pain, but even such torments as the Yuggya and their Princess can conceive of are not enough to loosen God-touched bonds, sworn in blood and soul-stuff. Will finds he is touching his own throat, absent-mindedly, his body remembering well enough the suffocation of its lungs and tongue even if it was not fresh in his mind at that moment.

Divination gives them something more to go on, a method less mundane than might have been the intention, the more so when it is carried out by one such as Beverly, whose blood is thick enough to call on a store of power that is all her own. The pull she summons for them to follow leads to a river, a bridge and a dam of woven wood caught upon the summit of a fall with the torrent pouring over it and landing in a spume of white foam. The tangle of branches is half pulled apart, a broken remnant of something that once held a planned design.

“Beavers,” Beverly says, vaulting over the lip of the bridge into the thigh-deep water below, scooping her wings in the air to slow her fall. She lands with less a splash than a quiet enveloping into the rush of the stream, which moves around her in ways her visible figure does not suggest. “Some folk don't like it when they build dams on their property; floods the banks and disrupts the fish. So they get rid of them, and the debris gets washed downstream.” Her voice gets louder as she wades towards the waterfall, or perhaps she leaves it behind her, to curl into the ears of those she means to hear it.

There's a scent of rot coming from somewhere. Will doubts it is entirely real, or rather, not real other than in the impression death has left on this place. The smell wouldn't naturally survive the river, but would adhere in memory to stone and bank and the brush of leaves against the surface as the wind dips them down. Beverly shouts from further up, concealed in spray. It's a sound of triumph.

When she returns, she is pulling a pair of corpses behind her. Price and Zzzeller lower down a gurney on ropes to her so she can load the first up, and with Will and Jack helping, they haul the grisly prize up and over the barrier and let the whole thing slide onto the stone. Price grimaces; Zzzeller lets out a buzz of surprise.

The thing is part-bloated, as any corpse left in water for a time, but the attenuated scent of decay is sweetened with something else, something resinous and warm as sap. The skin is discoloured; he was a pale white man once, but he hasn't now the cyanosed blue of the river but rather is covered in amber blotches and bits of ochre and tea-stained brown. Crouching to rap a knuckle against one patch Will finds it tough and hardened, as though laminated, plasticised.

“Urg, don't do that,” Price says with disgust. “Don't *touch* it, that's so *unsanitary*.”

“It's not natural,” Will says. “Or, not organic I mean. It's not *unnatural* either. Cultists, not their God.”

“It's made the skin split,” Zzzeller points out. “Here and here, where it's soft. To let the gasses out as it rotted.”

“There's more down there!” Beverly calls out, from the river where it laps at the pillars of the bridge. “Trapped amongst the branches. Lower the gurney again and let's start bringing them up.”

One by one the corpses rise, in various states of preservation. Some are done so neatly they are almost embalmed, would have been mummy-like without the exposure to the water. The sweet scent fills the air around them like heady gusts of perfume, so strong Will can almost imagine he can see them as drifts of yellow gas shifting and mingling in the unseen currents of body heat and river-damp. He inspects each body as it is laid on the surface of the bridge. All have that coating, that strange resin. All have holes nipped in the flesh, in odd lines and patterns. Marks of ritual, but no meaning he can piece together, not as yet.

But there's something leaking out, a trickle from those rents torn in the flesh. Will slips on a glove and gathers some between his fingers, rubs it against itself. He finds that he recognises it. Silicone. It's something he has used himself, from time to time, and for a purpose not all so very dissimilar. Sometimes he will preserve his catch if it is particularly impressive, although he does not do it often, for he prefers to eat what he kills. This stuff holds the shape of the fish as it was in life. So too these mortals in death. Sacrifice only is not enough. Their energy must be caught in these simulcra of existence and held there until the ritual is complete. But something had gone wrong with these ones. The life had leached, ebbed away in the wait, and they were no longer of any use.

If these six are the discards, he does not want to think of all those who have been kept.

In the lab, bodies are laid out in lines. Zzzeller has done his homework on them; recites his results for Jack and Will to hear.

“Different ages, different ethnicities, from towns ranging over three different states. Nothing in common except that they disappeared from their homes with their vehicles.”

“And they all had large amounts of opium in their system,” Price adds. “In large enough quantities to more than account for their deaths.”

“They wanted their minds open,” Will says. “Touching the void, touching this God. They wanted them in a place of spiritual vulnerability.”

Jack nods, accepting his statement. “What's the strange skin discolouration?”

“BHT, a preservative laid down underneath this resin,” Beverly replies. “Keeps them looking good as new. Only with these discards, it didn't exactly react well with the water.”

“There are eyelets here,” Will points out to Jack, running his fingers over the holes he had seen earlier. “Used for display. If we can find out more about other people who've

disappeared recently in the same states as these, then that might be enough for me to tell you exactly what kind of display that might be, if it lets me see how they're being chosen."

"We'll get you that information," Jack says, nodding.

He is as good as his word. Waiting for Will a few days later is a pile of boxes, folders each with a picture clipped to the front, a rough score whose images have been scooped from drivers databases in a multi-hued collage of humanity. The thought strikes him and remains in his mind like a weight. There's something there, something that seems *right.* Will pulls the pictures off each folder and spreads them out across his desk, rearranging them like cards, ordering them in a way that makes instinctual sense. It leaves him with tones from white to black, milk pale to obsidian dark. A palette. A microcosm of mortality, of the life this planet has to offer, of people of all kinds, all backgrounds, all the possibilities of phenotype encoded in the cells of these, these sacrifices.

The representation of the one is the representation of the whole. This is a sacrifice of the world made small, and who can say what kind of power that might call forth?

So he knows the why. But it leaves him no closer to the who, or the where.

Time provides the next piece of the puzzle. Will is called to the Quantico labs when a new body is found, far from the bridge and the dam, far from anything but farmland and the winding tributary where his corpse was discovered bobbing against the bank. He has the same resin coating his skin, but instead of the neat holes of eyelets great gapes of flesh have been torn from him, a violent excision from the ritual canvas. And yet on looking at this man Will cannot see any way in which he is not perfect for what these killers are trying to do. It makes no sense to discard him. He is not a failure to be thrown away.

"Roland Umber," Price is saying, as Jack joins them for the briefing. "Loner, no family, easy target. The same opium runs through his bloodstream as the others."

"But *unlike* the others he was ripped from the canvas, not unstrung," Jack says. His presence is heavy at Will's back. He can feel the urge of the hunt that burns under the thin-blood's skin, a predator's frustration that there is no easy trail to follow.

"And yet he's perfect," Will says. "There's no reason to be... *frustrated.* Angry. No, this isn't the doing of our cult." He pauses. Thoughts whirr and click in his brain. "How much do we know about him? His habits, his hobbies."

"You're thinking the opium might not have killed him," Beverly says, catching on fast.

"He survived what was done to him. He tore himself free. He ran."

"So how'd he end up in the water?" Beverly asks. "If he escaped..."

"Then wherever this ritual is being performed, it's somewhere upstream of where Mr Umber was found," Will says, completing the thought. "All we have to do is search."

“It's a tributary, but a tributary of a big river,” Zzzeller says, sounding doubtful even though Will can tell he's as excited about this as any of them. “A lot of ground to cover.”

“Then we search it all,” Jack says. “Assemble a taskforce. If we don't have the manpower, I'm sure our patron will be more than willing to help out.”

Will feels satisfaction curling in the back of his mind, but there is something almost... alien... about it. As thought it is not quite his own. As though something else is watching out of his head, peering through his eyes. But quickly as it was felt the sensation is gone, leaving him wondering if it was ever really there at all.

And yet that does nothing for the fear curdling in his stomach.

Chapter 3

The next time Will goes to sleep, a God is standing in front of him.

“Hello, Will,” Hannibal says, his mouth a small, sly smirk that merely hints at the needle-sharp teeth lurking within. “You haven't read the book yet.”

“And I'm not going to,” Will replies, snappish in his terror. “I'm not going to fall for an obvious trap like that.”

“Not a trap. A gift.” Hannibal shakes his head. Shadows ripple in the dark. “In any case I have need of your presence tomorrow. We shall be going on another journey, although we shall not travel as far afield as our last.”

Will opens his mouth to object, but the God has already faded away, and the black world where they had been standing melts away into a dream, and then he forgets that he is asleep and the altered reality of slumber sweeps over him once more.

In the morning, it is a little while before he remembers it, a little while where he relaxes in relative peace watching his dogs out running on the lawn, eating from a bowl of cereal held in one hand. Then the memories come creeping, working their way back in. He stiffens. As though summoned, he is aware of a presence at his back. A hand falls on his shoulder. It feels human enough, although he is very well aware that it isn't, not underneath.

“Good morning Will,” Hannibal says. “You had better get dressed.”

Will pulls away from the touch, every muscle taut. He glares at the Royal in his mundane skin and calls the hounds to heel. They come obediently enough, tongues lolling out, wagging their tails at the monster in the door. The person-suit is good enough to fool even their instincts. They stream around them into the house with happy whuffs and barks. Will follows them in, wanting nothing more than to slam the door in Hannibal's face, but he doesn't dare. The God remains out on the porch, waiting patiently whilst Will gathers up his clothes and pulls them on hurriedly, pausing only to splash his face with water in an effort to make himself more alert.

“Is Abigail going to be joining us?” he asks, once he has made himself decent – or as close to it as he can get under the circumstances.

“This journey is not entirely without risk, so no,” Hannibal replies. “I am bringing only those I need.”

“You need me,” Will says. Anticipation sours his gut. “What for?”

The God merely takes his hand, and then they are standing no longer outside Will's house but in a field of corn, the ears rising up around them on all sides. The air is full of the scent of soil and growing things. A little way away a trio of silos can be seen, their heads poking up

over the waving stalks. There's no sounds but the wind and the birds. The whole place seems deserted.

“Tell me Will, what do you sense?” Hannibal asks.

Nothing at the moment, but he knows the God wants more from him than that. Will opens his mind, stretches out past the obvious. He tastes the tang of old fear, the dregs of a single incident weeks past, mixed up with the hunger of a hunt, but little else. He says as much out loud.

“It is as I thought,” Hannibal says. “They have taken great pains to conceal this place, naturally. It seems we must investigate with more mundane senses.”

He slips away through the corn and Will follows close behind. They come out onto a dirt road leading up to the silos. Various rusty implements, mechanisms of farming life, lie rusting and abandoned next to the three great cylinders. There are tyre tracks in the dirt, preserved in the dried mud. Will tries to think when last it rained, but then, who is to say they are anywhere near Baltimore or Wolf Trap anymore. Hannibal inspects each silo one by one, and then stops, motioning Will to come closer. When he does so he sees that this one has a door with a store-shiny padlock holding it closed.

“Up and over, I think,” Hannibal says. There's a ladder set into the side of the silo. The God ascends first. Will hesitates, and then starts climbing. Better than remaining on the ground. Hannibal had said there would be danger, and in such circumstances, counter-intuitive as it is, he is safer nearer the Royal. The ladder turns an angle to follow the sloping roof of the building, and at the peak the God moves out onto the corrugated iron to allow Will to fully ascend. There is a small aperture there, where the metal would come to a point. Hannibal looks into it, his fingers becoming claws the better to keep his balance, and Will doesn't think he is interpreting that expression wrongly when he reads it as amusement and pleasure.

“Come and see,” he says. Will obeys.

At first it is too dark to make it out. Understanding come in pieces, as his brain interprets patterns of colour and shape and in the unfamiliarity of the reality of what he is seeing it takes a while to put it all together. When he does, he knows exactly where they are, and why.

In the space below, the space larger than it ought to be, larger as only a God's space can be, is a great circle of corpses, a wheel, an Eye. The paler tones of skin lie outmost as iris, whilst those which are darker are curled into the lesser circle within as pupil. There is a place in that innermost space which lies empty, and it takes no great trick of empathy or imagination to imagine Roland Umber there, before he tore himself free.

“Why are we here?” Will asks. He doesn't want to contemplate what he suspects is the answer, doesn't want to consider what it would mean if the God that's claimed him wants to go against the wishes of the Princess; a creature even further up the food chain that he is.

“I have no more wish than Cthylla does to see this upstart take such power,” Hannibal replies. “Though it is not her attention I intend to draw. But were I to do so, then all this is no more than it is my right to take, should I put myself forth in their world once again.

“Besides,” he says, “I am curious. Now come with me and we shall call forth this little God.”

It is no longer a man that crouches at Will's side but a monster, a creature made no more comprehensible by the open air, sun and sky which surrounds it so far apart from the shadows which are its natural home. His eyes see the form, clear enough, but somewhere along the transmission of that signal from retina to the back of his brain some vital thing is lost and everything becomes a confusion of limbs, tentacles, blurs and night-dark skin. Lithe and cat-like, the God leaps down through the hole which has become by sudden alchemy a much wider gap. Will hesitates, peering over the edge. It is a long fall.

At the bottom the God has landed light-footed outside the perimeter of the ritual. Hannibal looks up, and then a thick and physical darkness is reaching towards him. Will eyes it with disgust, but there is nowhere else to go but into its embrace. He is borne down, into the pit.

“And here is where I need you,” Hannibal says, looming up out of the dark, the scatter of his dull red eyes gleaming. “Right here, in the centre.”

He means in the empty space. Will gazes at it, thinking. Working it out the way he would a crime scene. “I don't match the pattern,” he says softly. “If you put me in the space I won't belong, not even dead and preserved.”

“You will be a simulacrum. A ghost of a ghost. The illusion of completion, but when the God comes to collect it will find nothing but smoke.”

He shouldn't be doing this. If choice was a option he should choose to leave and tell Jack all about this place and what lies within it. Then the Yuggya and their Mistress could come and do whatever they might want with the one who is behind it all. So much death. All these people, who aren't people to the God and its cult but material, paint on the palette, each individual a brushstroke. Will's resistance to Hannibal here will do nothing, and if the consequences fall on himself and Royal alike then so be it. It is not as though he cares what fate awaits the God who ordered this done, although he hopes it is painful.

“Do I just... lie down?” he asks.

“Naked, please, as the others are.”

Will could ask then what the point of getting dressed at all this morning was, but he doesn't. No, he does as he is told, stripping and lying half-curled up in the space between the dead. It makes his skin crawl, but he closes his eyes tight and tries not to shiver in the cold. Somewhere, a somewhere that seems very far away, Hannibal is chanting.

There is no great fanfare to the God's arrival. One moment there are but the two of them, the next, a third. Will feels it the moment it appears, the sudden chill in the air, the sense of something horrible pushing against the sight of his mind's eye. He keeps very still, but he can't stop himself from looking. It is an amorphous thing with a patch-work hide, all shades and colours and rough stitching like some beast of Frankenstein crafted from a hundred men. It growls when it sees Hannibal standing there.

“I have great admiration for your master-work,” Hannibal says. “But we both know you are not worthy of it.”

A ragged rip of a mouth opens up on the side of the thing facing them. “Who are you to say such things,” it snarls. “Some lackey of Cthylla's?”

Hannibal lets out a little chuckle. “No. But I do mean to eat you.”

And then he strikes.

Will does not watch the battle. He has seen enough of Godly war, when Hannibal and Toviyah fought. He closes his eyes again and retreats into himself, letting the crashing, the snarls, roars, unearthly screeches and wails recede as much as they can. It doesn't last long. A hand touches his shoulder, with the prick of delicate claws. Hannibal is standing there, looking satisfied with himself. There is torn flesh and neon-green blood splattered everywhere.

“You may rise now,” the God says. Will does so, scrambling to his feet. It seems almost anti-climactic. He was expecting this kind of ritual to result in... he doesn't know. At least the feeling, the sense, of something momentous.

“It is not quite over yet,” Hannibal says, as though reading his mind. It does not escape Will that the possibility is a real one.

“Then what?”

Hannibal twists back on himself, reaching for something on the ground behind him. His jaws close on it and drag it forward; an unconscious man... or is it a man? Given the trickles of green from the corners of his mouth and eyes, Will thinks not. How did Hannibal... although on reflection he decides he doesn't actually want to know. The God drops it into the space Will has just vacated. One of the being's legs is missing, another thing Will doesn't much want to question.

Hannibal's claws flash. Their target is twofold; one set scores a deep gash through the creature's biceps, the other opens up Will's forearm in a thin line that quickly wells blood. Will lets out a yelp, but Hannibal already has his wrist in an unwavering grip and is drawing his hand forwards, forwards and down until he is forced to his knees, leaning over the preserved dead, until the two cuts make contact.

It's like an electric current. Energy lashes into him, a flood, a torrent, a typhoon. Every little part of him is filled up and spilling over and after that there is only one place for it to go; to the God who has marked him, to the God whose flesh lived and lingered inside him for all those months and left its mark in a sympathetic link if nothing else. From the universe, to the Eye, to Will, to Hannibal. He is a channel, but not only that. He can already see that this is going to leave something behind. Another poisonous gift. No wonder Hannibal didn't tell him, because he would never have agreed, and in some way he can now see that consent of a sort was required.

These thoughts are fast and fleeting ripples amongst the torrent, but eventually that torrent subsides. Will feels it let go of him, allowing his body to relax. He had been held tight and taut as a bow. He shudders and pulls away, half-falling backwards, and catching himself awkwardly to avoid landing on the bodies lying all around. They are fresh of form no longer, but dried to leather and dusty bone, shrivelled, dessicated. Their life-force, caught as if in amber, has been consumed. Well, all aside from the pale God-form in the centre, that horror forced into humanoid form for the sake of the fit. That shell is whole enough, but very, very dead.

“And home we go,” Hannibal says, and the nightmare world fades away.

Any after-effects of the power he has been given do not immediately present themselves. Perhaps his dreams are more calm. Often Will finds himself in a stream, fishing whilst the waters flow steady and powerful around his feet. The fly sings and buzzes through the air, a bright whip of feathers. Forest lines each bank, somehow familiar. One might scarce call it a nightmare at all, but it must be, for other kinds of dreams do not exist.

One night he sees the stag again. It has been some time. In fact, now he comes to think of it, it has been since the revelation about Hannibal, about what he is. The beast is standing on the bank under the shade of a spreading beech, watching him. It makes no move to do anything more, and Will does not feel afraid of it as he has done in the past. It does not seem to *mean* anything, if only he could get some handle on it. He lets it be, it lets him be, they co-exist on and in the river.

Then Beverly's work finds them the farm. He should have expected it – she is the best hunter of the metaphysical they have – but it still catches him off guard. He is called to the scene, of course. The whole team is. By the time he gets there the entire task-force is swarming around the three buildings, and the row of body bags outside is already beginning to stack up.

“This is a complete mess,” Jack tells him “It doesn't take your gift to look in there and see we're too late. They've completed the ritual.” His frustration is plain. A certain degree of trust was placed in their team by a very important individual, and they failed Her. Her reaction can only be predicated on the degree of confidence she might have had in them in the first place. If they are lucky, that will not have been much.

“So what now?” he asks.

“It's here, so you might as well look. If there's anything, anything at all you can tell us Will, then it's better than nothing.”

Will follows Jack through the narrow door into the main silo. Expecting it, the sudden expansion of space does not surprise him. It all looks very much as it had just over a week ago, the bodies shrivelled, the dead God in the centre. No power remains to cling to the walls. It all went through him.

Seeing no better option, he goes through the motions, pacing around the outside of the circle, looking at the sigils painted on the ground, pretending he is putting himself as close as he can

to the mind of a God. In this case even if he hadn't been here it would be easier. The search for power, the desire to triumph over an enemy, those are not exactly alien concepts to him or any other mortal.

The ghost of Hannibal is here, if he wanted to go anywhere near that deep pool of a mind. Even the mere glance at it conjures the echo of satisfaction in him, pleasure at the death of this lesser creature of Royal blood. It's a feeling easily echoed in Will's thoughts, hate of this monster, this murderer, this *thing* lying skewered in the centre of it's own horrific construction. For a few moments he feels as though his heart beats in time with a strong, slow heart many miles away. Then he jerks himself out of it, skin beading with sudden sweat. No. That is not a good idea.

“So who is this?” Will asks, slipping back into the pretence, gesturing at the green-blooded corpse.

“We don't know,” Jack admits. “But we are curious about him. The Eye cult has only ever chosen humans as their sacrifices, and Royalty tends not to require the blood of their own for things like this. We were hoping you might shed some light on that.”

Will shakes his head. “If it's intention I can read that well enough, but I don't have any specialised knowledge of ritual or rite. I can say that he needed to be there in the centre, that his presence is the key to all of this, but I can't tell you why. I'm sorry Jack. My skills simply don't stretch that far.”

It's not entirely a lie, but it's enough of one that it rankles. He wouldn't call what he has with Jack a good working relationship exactly, but he doesn't make it his habit to avoid the truth when it comes to him. But saying more would be to incriminate himself. Whatever his part in that ritual, Will knows it was forbidden.

Jack sighs. “I'll let Sssiii'ruk in on the news,” he says.

Another night free of fear. Will is aware of himself in the dream, the water lapping cold around his ankles, the smooth stones under his feet. His arms move without concious control in the arched flick of the rod in his hands. The fly lands with the slightest splash. The stag watches from the bank.

But he knows he is dreaming. He lowers his hands and the rod disappears. Wind rustles the trees. It feels fresh and clean and smells of summer. The sun is high overhead and the day is warm, in the dream, and all around him the forest stretches for miles. He looks at the stag, which snuffles at him. It doesn't seem to mean him any harm.

Wading through the river, Will makes his way to dry land. He climbs on to wet gravel, rough and sticking to the soles of his feet. Looking around, he sees a pair of his boots and socks left by a rock nearby, and sits down to tug them on. As he does so the stag comes to him and noses at his shoulder, a light and delicate touch that is warm even through two layers of clothing. Will looks up at it.

“What do you want?” he asks it. It doesn't – can't – say anything, but it tosses its head in the direction of the wood to their left. It wants him to follow it. Will puts a hand to its back to steady himself as he rises and finds the feathers and fur soft as silk beneath his fingers. Strong, powerful muscles bunch and move under the hide. The beast trots away along a path that only it knows, making Will jog to keep up with it. It isn't tiring, not here.

As they go the forest becomes darker, the undergrowth tangled with thorns, branches bare in places overhead. Bark and leaves blacken. The ground slopes downwards. Will begins to have certain suspicions as to their destination. “Hannibal?” he asks, but the stag makes no reply, only glances back at him over its shoulder with a look in its eyes that tells him he isn't quite right. This creature isn't the God himself, but it is connected to him in some way.

They come out of the trees suddenly into a wide open space of bare earth. In the centre of the space is a single standing stone, jutting upwards as though to pierce the very heavens. Will's eyes are drawn to it first, a kind of hypnotic quality transfixing him for long moments before the occupants of this space catch his attention instead. There is Hannibal, as he'd thought, as incomprehensible of form now as he was the last time Will saw him, although the sun here is if anything more piercing than that of the cornfield. He is lying sphinx-like in front of the obelisk, and Abigail is with him with a long stick in her hand, walking in circles and trailing it behind her to inscribe something onto the ground. Hannibal is speaking, but he looks up when the stag bounds towards him.

The God stands – or perhaps flows – up. He greets the stag in the way of animals, with soft and wary touches, snout to snout. The beast takes a step back and bows, its nose grazing the ground. Then it gives a shake, as if dismissing these formalities, and goes to investigate Abigail and the patterns she has been carving in the earth. Hannibal looks over at Will and calls to him, bidding him join them.

He hesitates, but in the end obeys.

“Where did you find this fine buck?” the God asks him, once he is near. He sounds in good spirits.

“He was watching me from the riverbank,” Will replies, not really wanting to get into the details. He is surprised though that Hannibal doesn't already know – he had been half suspecting the creature had been sent on the God's behalf to keep an eye on him.

“Then I am curious how he found you. I have not seen his kind for a very long time. Now one has followed a trail from you to me, along a road from your dreams to my lands.” The God watches as Abigail threads her fingers through the stag's fur and feathers, murmuring softly into the beast's ear. It lets her, seemingly content to be petted. “I am not ungrateful for the gift, but I am suspicious of the hand of fate that dealt it.”

Once, Will would have felt it simple to make a rejoinder, to start up the flow of conversation that had always come swift and easy between the two of them. When he had not known the truth, he had trusted this monster, trusted him with the self he mostly hides from the rest of the world. Hannibal knows things about him no other being does. That had been... a comfort he had never had before. Now it is a nightmare. The God might want to pretend that nothing

has changed, that they can speak as friends again, but Will will not be a party to that sort of foolish deception. So, he says nothing.

“Change is the river you stand in each night Will,” Hannibal tells him. “Whether you think yourself rock or flesh, one day you will be washed away.”

“You said you'd take my hate as easily as my worship,” Will replies, throwing the God's words back at him.

“If all outcomes are good to me, might I not still have a favourite?” Hannibal says. “Although there is a present we must think of before we come to that future. If my *varnos* have found me, others will after.”

Will thinks he will have as little choice about getting involved in whatever that means as he has in everything else that the God has called him to do thus far. Should he ask? But that's what Hannibal wants from him, a pleasure and satisfaction he shall not give him.

“Then enough of that for now,” the God says. “You are needed elsewhere. Let lesser things occupy you until the time comes.”

And then Will is back in the stream with the rod in his hands, alone except for the wind.

“What a good boy,” Abigail tells the stag, scratching along the line of its jaw in a way it seems to enjoy. “You're just the sweetest thing.”

“You spoil him,” her God tells her, settling back down now that Will has been vanished to his own dreams. It's just like Will to find his own way here rather than having to be shown; he has so much innate talent, so much potential, that it always makes her angry to see how he squanders it. She simply doesn't *understand* him. Why is he trying so hard to spurn the gift he has been given? It is such an insult to reject the favour of a God, but she can't say anything about it because Hannibal Himself doesn't seem to mind. Still. She doesn't have to like it.

“Did Ithaca really send him?” Abigail asks, still working her fingers in at the meeting of fur and feather. “He seems too friendly for that.”

“Our enemy did not send him,” Hannibal answers. His claws flex against the soil. “He may however have allowed him to come, in hope of following behind as the hounds follow the fox to its den. The *varnos* have been severed from me for so long...”

“They served you, once?”

The God nods. “And will again. Once Ithaca is no more.”

“I'm not sure Will is going to be ready.” It had been hard at first to dare so much in expressing her doubts to her God, but He had taught her better. He wants her doubts, her thoughts, her words. He wants her as she is now, changed by blood and death and pain. That is the way in which she is worthy.

“He is already changing. He does not see it, but he will. Strange stars burn in the deep parts of his mind, channels reaching out to touch something so far and vast even I cannot know it. He denies this, as he has every waking day since the moment of his birth, but he cannot do so for much longer.”

Abigail had thought at first that Hannibal was feigning this ignorance as some kind of test, but now she knows better. Because she is trusted, her God does not lie to her. He has no need to. “So what now?”

“Now, young Priestess, we return to your lessons.”

Something strange about this man in the mural, Beverly thinks, when they get him back to the lab. No mistaking the green blood that trickles from nose and mouth, no mistaking strangeness of organs inside when they open him up, split sternum to pubis, like leather bags stitched one by one. So his blood is not so thin, so what? The question itches, irritates. Instinct, that lodestone pull, over-rides. Not what he seems. Not what he seems.

So she pulls in Will, whose mind is a jeweller's lens, a key that opens any lock. She has always trusted what he sees and more so having seen for herself the workings of it, when she held it closed against those truths humans cannot handle. A deep mind, human but not quite, although that makes no sense. His blood is mortal sure enough. But he has led them this far, and she thinks he can lead them further.

He is not alone when he comes. Hannibal is with him. Beverly has not seen them together for some time, a strange thing when once they were so close, it seemed, that each was a shadow of the other, at times unseen in the light, but always apt to come around again. Now Will widens the gap between them, stands not so near, smells of fear. Hannibal smiles at her, one thin-blood to another. She greets him with a nod. More minds the better, to find the answers she seeks.

“I'm not sure what more you think I can tell you,” Will is saying. “I've told Jack everything I've seen.”

“I know, and we're all very grateful,” Beverly replies. “I only asked because there's something not quite right about this one. Okay, maybe he didn't dry up like the rest because of his bloodline, but he just doesn't *feel* quite right. And we still have no idea who he is. No records of him anywhere.” She goes on, delving into every little detail, every finding of search and autopsy, divination and detective work.

Will shifts, seems uneasy. Not just in the act of looking, which she has seen often enough to recognise, but something more. “I'm sorry,” he says. “I really don't see anything more. Maybe you'd have more luck with a necromancer.”

A thought she's had, and perhaps a good one. But instinct says no, no hope to be found there.

As Will is leaving, Hannibal comes closer to look at the body, scooping up a lens to magnify the delicate stitches that before they were cut held him to the mortals all around. He hums,

deep in his throat, with strange resonance. “You have to get to the truth behind the appearances,” he says to her quietly. “Only by going deep beneath the skin will you understand the nature of this cult's pathology.”

She wants to ask him to explain what he means, but in flat, blood-red eyes is a look which tells her different. Wariness holds her tongue. Then he too is gone, and curiosity bides only in his wake. What might thin-blooded Hannibal know, and wish her to find out?

Chapter 4

Beverly has not always been cautious, but long life gives gifts other than the mere passage of years, wisdom and experience being chief amongst them. Click, click of ideas ratcheting in her mind, turning the words of the thin-blood over and round that each aspect may be examined, a lathe on which is carved meaning and intent. She gives no outward sign of her inner endeavours, for the FBI asks more of her than but one case at a time, and it is easy to find other things to keep her body occupied while her brain follows its own path.

This is a masquerade, a shadow-play, that much she sees. No player wears their true face entire, nor makes manifest their true thoughts in word or deed. Everywhere a puzzle, everywhere illusion, only visible by the light that shines between the cracks of the pieces. When even the depth of her analysis has exhausted the memory of the scene – herself, Will, Hannibal – she returns to the body of their sacrifice.

If she is to go 'beneath the skin', then more is meant than simple autopsy, which she has already done. She runs her fingers over the dead flesh and finds them catching on the edges of the wounds she herself has made. Is something different there? Something not as it should be? Beverly reaches for a lens of glass, looks through the warp of magnification. Something beneath the skin in a literal sense?

With great care she slides the tip of a scalpel between the layers she thinks she sees. Peels apart the outer skin, whence she should find fat and fascia underneath, and yet instead there is a second skin, dry and sheer like waxed leather. She takes it further. There is a strange sense of pressure beneath this first false mortal-seeming hide, as though waiting to burst, as though what is within is greater than the form without. Look, here, a line of stitches made of no natural thread. Here, the leather changes, colour, texture. Here, something stuck, something compressed and flattened and...

The arm slides free. Three joints, claw-tipped. Ichor-green staining and... a scrap of flesh hanging ragged from those needle-points? Beverly pulls it loose. Black hide like an oil-slick. Not much in itself but as another part of this building picture her instincts have more than enough to coalesce around.

A God forced into a lesser body like an ill-fitting suit. God-stuff on its claws. There had been battle, struggle, Royalty twinned where there should only have been one, the Duke to whom this great sacrifice was dedicated. So who else was there? Who with power and strength? Is the one who slew the creature before her the one for whom they had been searching, and if not, then does that one lie on her table here and now? If so, who might have the power to take that life?

Beverly has never seen any point in trying to hide her half-blood, Godling self, but she knows others of her kin sometimes try, for reasons of their own. She knows it is not an easy thing, to suppress the ways in which they are not of this world, to shimmy and slide into a person-suit of their own devising. Humans have their own prey-instincts, and usually can tell when the

wolf goes abroad in sheep's clothing. So to be a God in hiding, or to force a God into hiding, requires a skill she is almost afraid of.

She follows the trail the evidence leaves in her mind, not liking its direction. Hannibal? He's a thin-blood with only the faintest drop of green in him. Yet before she had done as he asked, skinned this sacrifice, she would not have ranked *this* creature of nobler birth than her. So what now, if it is him? If Hannibal is in fact a God? If he is, then he killed this Duke without fear or hesitation, killed him and certainly took his due. He has no lack of confidence. He dropped her this hint, will have anticipated the outcomes. If Beverly were to think of telling the wrong person of what she suspects she has no doubt he has the power to see her dead before the words left her mouth. Nor is it in her nature to forget what she has learned.

Beard the lion in its den? Confront him? He must have expected her to figure it out. Perhaps recognition is what he wants. Recognition and the appropriate subservience of lesser to greater amongst the Blood.

Her pride isn't worth her life. If that's the safe path, she'll take it.

Beverly prepares in advance. Rude to approach a God without an offering of some kind, and she must assume Hannibal's tastes haven't change for all that what she knows of him has. She goes delving into her savings account and pays a visit to a very exclusive boutique where a kind-eyed Godling sells honey grown in human hives. Each pot ensnares the memory of a life and a segment of a soul. Then she drives into Baltimore, to the house of the hidden God.

He answers the door in the form that she knows, with a smile and a nod and words of welcome. “Here,” Beverly says, proffering her gift. “I brought you something.”

Hannibal takes it, examining the label. Pleasure ghosts at the corners of his lips. “Thank you, Ms Katz. How very thoughtful of you.”

That's good. She has made the right moves thus far. “May I come in?”

“You may.” He stands aside to let her pass, and as she does she stretches out tendrils of a self outside earthly dimensions, hoping to catch some whiff or scent of power to let her know that she is right, but there is nothing, merely that so-slight amusement on Hannibal's face, all too knowing.

“I hope you don't think it's rude of me showing up like this,” Beverly says, rubbing her palms on her jeans. A human affectation picked up from mortals – she doesn't sweat.

“Perhaps under other circumstances, but I have been expecting you.”

Should she come out and say it? Will it have the sound of an accusation? Will *he* say it, or is this game, this anticipation, food for his own appetites? They have not gone further than his foyer, warm oak boards underfoot, pale off-green wallpaper in line with Royal style and tastes without being so bold as to make unfounded claims of blood-line – save that in his case they would not be so unfounded.

“Then I guess you already know why I'm here.”

Hannibal inclines his head. “Of course. You have delved beneath the skin to find the God revealed, and now you simply have to know. Knowing will always be your weakness.”

If Beverly were capable of sweating, she would be now. Has she made the wrong choice in coming here? The green walls seem to be closing in around her. The air is thick. It smells of the deep forest. “That's why I joined the FBI in the first place,” she says. “Because it meant I got to solve mysteries.”

“No need for the past-tense, Ms Katz,” Hannibal says. “Not yet at any rate. I am a hungry God, but I do not fancy myself a cruel one.”

“So you admit it?” She wishes he would show himself, leave aside this false-self he is wearing and let her see who he really is. That would tell her so much more about what she is dealing with... which of course is why he doesn't. “Why? Why hide at all? Why pretend to be something you're not, when it means giving up so much?”

“It has been a necessary deception, but one which I hope may not be required for much longer. Hence your presence here.”

“Are you looking for a Prophet? An Emissary?” Beverly relaxes a little. It does not seem as though her death is imminent.

Hannibal smiles, that little, familiar quirk of his mouth so small and quick it might easily be missed. “Perhaps just another weight to tip the scales. It is said that two can keep a secret if one is dead, but I no longer want my secret kept from the one who so eagerly searches to know it. The more minds which know me, the stronger my scent will grow.”

Beverly wants to ask who is looking for him, but instinct tells her that this is not a question that is safe to ask or that would be answered even if it was.

“That body,” she says instead. “The God. That's not going to stay a secret now, and Cthylla will want to know the truth. Am I going to tell her?”

“With your permission, you will not be able to.”

He's offering her a choice and Beverly is smart enough to be aware of the options. Submit to a binding, an oath of the kind which held closed the throats of the Cult of the Great Eye against just such pointed questions, or never leave this place again. She can be pragmatic – she came here with that intention didn't she?

She bares her throat.

At first the whole business almost passes Will by, ensconced as he is in his lecture hall. Jack has had no need to call on him of late, not since coming to a dead end regarding the Eye. The first he knows of this new mess is when the hawk-headed man enters the room against the

out-flowing tide of students leaving for the day, great golden eyes fixed on his target of Will Graham, notable mortal.

“Can I help you?” Will asks, packing up his slides and notes in his worn leather satchel and trying to avoid meeting that piercing gaze. Aside from the obvious, there's not all that much off and unnatural about this person, and he thinks it would not be difficult to slip the other way through that effort of visual analysis and read the mind lurking behind.

“You're Will Graham, aren't you?” His voice is melodic, but that's not so surprising given the avian traits. “We haven't met before, but I've been told a lot about you.”

“Why are you here?” Will asks, skirting the edges of rudeness. He finds himself impatient these days. The presence of God's-blood rankles even more than it usually does.

“My name's Matthew,” the godling tells him. “I'm one of Cthylla's. Lesser spawn of lesser spawn, you know how it is. But since your lab tech found a Duke under that false-skin in the centre of the Eye's sacrifice, I've been sent to keep an eye on this case, see how you're all getting on. Wouldn't be my first choice of assignment, but I go where I'm told.”

Will does his best not to startle too badly. Hannibal had said something to Beverly the last time they had all been in the same room together, just as they were leaving, but he hadn't thought it would lead to... Well obviously they don't know who is responsible otherwise this conversation would be a very good deal less friendly. But still. Fear leaps up his throat, threatening to choke, threatening to roar out, but circumstance makes him leash it. He lets anger take its place behind his tongue. At least when he is angry it is cold anger and he can think. Fear makes him rash, makes him foolish.

“I hadn't heard the news,” he says, calm and measured. “I'm not particularly... involved, in the case anymore. I'm good with mortals and thin-bloods, but anything more than that I'm not the profiler you need.”

“You can't blame me for thinking you might have an opinion.” His voice sounds like its smiling. The hawk's beak doesn't give him the luxury of expression, clearly. Less mutable of form than Alana then. “Your analysis helped find the Eye to begin with, and everyone here is *very* keen to assure me how useful you are to them.”

“Useful to *them*; I suspect less useful to you or the Princess.”

“Well, I'm sure you'll let your team know if anything comes to mind.”

The hawk-man – Matthew – leaves, but as he does so Will can't help but reach out just a little. Perhaps its simply that the unexpected encounter has him on edge, has him wanting to exert some degree of control over his life, over the situations he finds himself in. He reaches, mind to mind, and touches...

A predator, sharp-focused, a mind like the point of an arrow. An arrow pointed at Will.

He's interesting, the inner voice thinks. *New and shiny and* interesting.

Will is called to see Jack the day after that, but more to simply fill him in on the new findings than to actually ask for his thoughts about their God-killer. It makes sense from any outside perspective; anything strong and powerful enough to kill a Duke is not going to be something that Will can latch his mind onto and understand. The last time he had tried to analyse a God he had destroyed the natural barriers in his mind and it had taken months to learn how to rebuild them.

Of course he knows this is Hannibal's doing, so in actual fact he could tell them rather a lot, if it was anything like in his interests to do so.

At the same time Jack explains about Matthew, their new watcher. Jack doesn't seem any more impressed by the Godling than Will is. It must grind on his nerves to have all these observers flitting in and out of the investigation, getting in the way and contributing nothing. A blow to his pride as well, that Princess Cthylla doesn't think them capable enough to do their jobs without someone to keep an eye on them. Still, Will is well out of it. He shouldn't have to deal with the case again.

So it comes as something of an unpleasant surprise to open his door in Wolf Trap one morning and find Matthew on the other side. “Hi,” he chirps. Will's dogs mill around his legs, torn between their need to go outside and their instinctive dislike of the creature standing on the porch.

“What are you doing here?” Will asks sharply. “It’s my gift to see a lot of things,” the Godling replies. “Things others can’t. I can see the blood on your hands Will. You might say I’m an admirer.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Matthew raises a finger to his beak, silence in the form of gesture. “I understand. You can’t take the risk of admitting it. But I can see the green. Not many humans are brave or clever enough to do what you’ve done. It’s impressive, honestly.”

“Just what,” Will says, choosing his words with care, “are you accusing me of?”

“Nothing, nothing,” the Godling says. He doesn’t blink; it’s unnerving. “Just thought I’d drop by and tell you how *much* I’m going to enjoy working with you.”

And then he leaves. As he trots away down the road the air opens up in front of him with a downstroke of ghostly, half-there wings, like ripples of heat on a summer’s day, and he is gone. The dogs rush out onto the front lawn yapping and barking, chasing each other in little circles with frenetic energy. They’re happy to have chased off the predator, in their own doggy minds. Will stays where he is and focuses on breathing. Killing Devan Silvestri feels a million miles away and ages past, even though it has only been what, a few months? And killing Garret Jacob Hobbs before that… It feels distant and alien, those memories of his potential. Hannibal had always gone on and on about that, claiming it would make him a better, wiser, happier person if he could just commit to that version of himself - for his own reasons, it is now clear. Not much use as a Prophet who won’t make sacrifices.

Still. It had been satisfying to kill the Godling, although that had been mostly buried under fear of being caught. The same fear that now chills his veins and keeps him standing in place. But anger, oh, anger is always his antidote to fear. If Matthew thinks Will is just some mortal here for his amusement, he had best be wary.

It seems wrong to wish Hannibal on anybody, but Gods do not share.

Will was imagining swift and fierce jealousy, a sudden disappearance, another summons on a trip to lands near or distant. But that does not come. Matthew remains in Quantico, haunting the peripheries, watching everything with piercing golden eyes, and Hannibal remains… absent. Will would never say that he misses their appointments, their little talks, but he is used to the sense of presence, of constant awareness that he is being watched. Watched over. It's unpleasant, but its absence is… unnerving. Why has the God done nothing?

No, Will thinks, he knows why if he stops to think about it for more than a second. Hannibal wants to see what he will do. He is expecting Will to handle this for himself.

That means he is expecting death. Will thinks about how he could do it. The thoughts, in general, are not new ones. It would hardly be the first time he has fantasised about killing Godlings, and he has many, many memories of old cases to draw on, Restorationists practising their work, following in the footsteps of Rache and the Limping Doctor. The trouble being that all of these actions resulted in the humans involved being caught, mostly in ways that would have been inevitable even without the use of Will's own particular capabilities.

His lectures take a slant towards this topic, keeping the ideas fresh in his mind. He lives them, breathes them, dreams about them at night. But there's still that disconnect, that sensible part of him which has always ruled his darker instincts that says this is no more than fantasy, a game to occupy your thoughts. You'd never be so foolish as to actually *do* anything.

Somebody else ends up acting far before he does.

Will walks into the lecture hall one morning to find a corpse waiting for him. A Godling, a jowled, batrachian thing stretched backwards over the severed head of a stag, impaled on antler-points. Arms upheld by ropes and pulleys, supplicating. A cold-iron claw-hammer buried deep in the creature's chest. Will is reaching out for the killer's mind before he even has a chance to think; instinct when a crime scene is placed in front of him. He breathes, and time sweeps backwards.

This is a confused jumble of disparate parts forced together, not really some considered whole. Sharp predator-thoughts weave around the body, the sense of fierce and focussed attention. Flesh and feathers. Flicker of images, memories of a past seen but not lived. A familiar mind, a familiar psychic scent. Will watches Matthew – the ghost of him, made manifest by his mind's eye – drag the thin-blood kicking and croaking through a path outside normal dimensions and into this hall, wrestle him down onto sharp horns that pierce and hold his flesh. Not enough to kill the thing. No, just enough to keep him trapped and weakened,

until the iron hammer comes down, Matthew's own hand protected by the heavy wrappings around the handle.

This design is not Matthew's own. It is a mixture of pieces taken from the personal history of Will Graham, not even necessarily things he had a personal hand in but just things associated with him, associated with strong memories and strong emotions, strong enough to leave their stain on his own particular timeline. It is... an offering, of sorts, although the concept is just so very *wrong*. Will is human, *human,* not a God to be pleased and placated by blood offered up in his name. Is this the only way the hawk-headed thin-blood can see the world, the only way he can conceive of showing admiration and respect?

Will worries very much that it is. That this is meant as a compliment. A gift.

What was this dead thing like? Did he deserve such a fate? There is no mind left to grasp at, no evidence which might give him some clue. If he was cruel, if he was like so many of his kin, then maybe Will is grateful, maybe he can allow himself the pleasure of this kill, of ichor shed. But if he was like Jack, like Beverly... How can he know how to feel about this without *knowing*?

Then his students start to arrive, and someone rather less the predator than the others starts screaming.

There are questions, of course, and many of them directed towards Will. Jack comes himself to ask him what he sees – such a murder in the very heart of the FBI itself can hardly be ignored. Such a blow to pride and sense-of-self, when Godlings are not safe even here. Will tells him as much of the truth as he can, even unto the fact that this is something meant for him, omitting only the name he already knows. He does not need Matthew's own gift to see how well that would turn out, given whose orders the Godling is here on.

It seems enough, for now. Jack lets him go home, tapes off the room, gets the techs in to start working over the place. It seems Will will have to rearrange his commitments for the foreseeable future.

When Will dreams that night, he sees the stag again. He is at the river once more, which seems to have become the centre of his own personal dream-lands. Perhaps it is only the usual internal world of a mortal, or perhaps having been to the Dreamlands in body he has found a way into them in mind now as well. He does not know which it might be or how to tell, although he has no doubt Hannibal would know. Will has no intention of asking him. The Necronomicon would surely also give him the answer, were he foolish enough to retrieve it from its hiding place. He is not curious enough to be tempted.

Wading through the stream, Will approaches the creature. It snuffles at him, at his hands and his chest, nudging him with its nose. He pets it. It seems the thing to do.

“How much do you really understand me?” he asks it. The beast tosses its head, but if it can speak it is not in any way audible or understandable by humans.

“You came to me first, not to Hannibal,” Will says. “You're still one of his creatures though. Perhaps that means I can't trust you, can't talk to you. But it feels like there's no-one I *can* talk to these days. Hannibal used to be my anchor, my paddle in difficult waters. I thought I could rely on him. If he gave me bad advice because of the way his mind worked, because of what he was, I thought it would be obvious enough to dismiss. Now he's the problem I need to talk about, or one of them, so you see my dilemma.”

The stag nuzzles his cheek. The short fur on its muzzle is soft and downy, somewhere between the silk of feathers and the warmth of wool. Oddly comforting.

“All my life I've been alone. I've never needed human contact, social bonds. More danger than solace. Yet now that I've had something like that it's hard to go back to the way things were. Even if you will tell Hannibal all of this, I can allow myself the denial of pretending you won't.”

The stag draws back, shaking its head. Will looks at it doubtfully. It snorts, its breath coming out as steam even though the air has no particular chill. Is it so simple? This beast to be his confidant in Hannibal's place? It may protest but he will not trust it fully, not burned already from Hannibal's great lie.

Yet still he will talk to it. Difficult not to, after the offer of a willing ear.

“Thank you,” he whispers, his fingers buried in its warm fur.

He tells the stag the night after that about Matthew and the corpse the thin-blood left him, and then a few nights later the stag comes to him with something clenched in its teeth. When Will goes to see what it is, the beast drops a set of cold-iron shackles into his hands, looking pleased with itself. Will nearly drops them. Just like anything else forged of this particular metal such artefacts are forbidden him, mere mortal that he is, and even though this is just a dream that instinctive fear still comes. The metal is chilled, biting at his skin, as though it has travelled through a place of ice and snow. Will looks at the stag, at it licking the cold from its carnivore's teeth.

“What do you think I'm going to do with these?” he asks it, although he very well knows. After everything he has been complaining of? The stag gives him a knowing look. Will sighs. “Thank you.”

When he wakes, curled up in his bed on his side, the iron links are still there, clutched between his hands.

It isn't possible to predict a time and place where Will might get the hawk-godling alone. Whenever he happens to see him at Quantico, which is often, lurking in the background and watching, watching, there are always others around as well; agents, his students, other lecturers. He could try and lure him away into a deserted room or corridor but what then? There would be noise enough to make others come running, and even if they didn't, what of the body? Nor has Matthew been back at Will's house since that first time.

But perhaps he can be tempted there. He must want to know what Will thinks of the gift he left, and is no more able to approach and ask than Will is for just the same reasons. Jack and his team are still searching hard for the killer in their midsts, angry and champing at the bit, ready to chase after but the slightest hint of the truth. Hounds leashed by a lack of facts. So Will writes a note of invitation and keeps it in his pocket until a moment when quite by chance he passes near enough by Matthew that he can simply slip it out and hand it over. Claw-tipped fingers take it curiously.

Then Will waits. Not long. He specified time and date on his little missive, and sure enough, Matthew does not disappoint. Punctual as would be anyone with such a pointed mind, there comes the knock on the door, just as expected. Will gets up from where he has been waiting in a chair by the fire, taking the shackles with him. He lets them hang low in his left hand, pressed against his slacks where shadow hides them. Not enough to fool for long, but long is not what he needs.

Matthew is there when he opens the door, too close, over-eager. Will smiles and steps left and aside to invite him in, and as he enters snaps out his hand and lets the first loop click closed over the Godling's wrist. The scream is immediate. Matthew collapses, kicking out in pain, scratching and biting at his wrist where the sharp smell of burning is already coming from his skin. Will crouches down, pressing a knee onto the thin-blood's chest to hold him still. The free end of the chain with its second shackle is swinging loose and takes several attempts to catch with the amount Matthew is writhing, a few attempts more to get it on as well.

The acrid reek of char worsens. The ear-splitting screeches from that avian throat have set the dogs off, their own howls joining the awful caterwauling. Will tries to get his hands around the Godling's throat to shut him up but he's moving too much, fighting back as much as his weakened state will let him. Will settles instead for punching him in the throat a few times and smashing his head off the floor.

It does the trick. The screeching tails off into a rough, high-pitched whine. Gold eyes, once piercing, rove between Will and the ceiling, trying and failing to focus. Blood-ichor is trickling from nostrils high up on the beak, muddy not-quite-green. Will is aware that he is smiling. He feels good. Powerful. There is no fear in him now.

“Now what shall I do with you?” Will asks out loud. “Do I excite you as much now? Am I still interesting? Exceptional?”

A ragged whisper from the gasping beak. Will leans down a little the better to catch it, though not close enough for a head-butt or snapping bite to catch him off guard.

“Please, please...” Matthew is begging. “Hurts... hurts, please, anything...”

Matthew has nothing Will wants. For a moment he fantasises about sending the Godling after Hannibal, sending him with those iron chains to snap tight around the wrists of that thin-blood person-suit, but it's fleeting. He has seen what Hannibal can do. Those chains would not hold him, and Matthew would be little more than a morning morsel to further build the God's power. No, that would be as good as offering up a sacrifice, acting the Prophet he does not wish to be.

No, no, this Godling is Will's prey now, and he will take his time with him.

Chapter 5

When it is finished, over with and done, the blood coating his arms like heavy mud tacky and clinging, Will sits back on his heels and lets the anger out of him in overheated pants. Adrenaline washes away, like the gradual lapping out of the tide. He looks down at the ruinous work of his hands and finds it to be good. The very sight soothes him. Something hurt and broken in his heart is eased by it, healed by it. Perhaps not all the way, but enough to give him great relief.

The question of what comes next flits into his head. Consequences, well, those had not occupied his thoughts at any point – strange for him. But if Hannibal never lifted a hand – or claw, or tentacle – to help him here, when there was violence to be done, Will doesn't think that means he will not help him afterwards. Abandonment might be welcome, but Will rarely gets what he wants.

Except for this. He wanted this.

So, he allows instinct to take over. Instinct and memory, the work that others did, these ghosts he welcomes into his flesh. Where does a bird belong but in a nest? With motions that have the weight of ritual Will heaves the corpse up over his shoulder, light and hollow-boned, and takes it out into the woods. A spot soon enough presents itself. Will acts as though in a dream, or as though outside himself for he has been more in control in his dreams than he is now. Or perhaps he is just letting some part of himself, long suppressed, bubble to the surface.

With deadwood Will crafts his bower, lacing branches in and out, weaving patterns. He plucks eyes from what remains of a face, sets them cupped in hands still bound in iron chains. Props a spine up against a sturdy trunk, a priest at prayer, a hermit in silent contemplation. If Matthew contemplates anything now it is Will's ascendancy, Will's power, mortal though he might be. The thought is a pleasant one, a burning-warm one, a banked fire kept close to his heart.

Will leaves once he is done, though not before he has fixed the scene in his memory in this perfect, untouched state. He knows it will not lie thus undisturbed for long, for Wolftrap is not so deserted a place as all that, and the echoes of Godling death will be felt in one way or another. There are enough houses in the lands around that Will might in theory maintain deniability for a time, but when he knows the victim, when the victim has taken such an interest in him... And yet he is not afraid. He has certainty – he is not willing to call it faith – certainty in Hannibal, who will not let the prize named Will Graham slip away from him so easily.

Back at the house, Will takes a long shower, scrubbing his skin and hair clean of the smallest trace of green, and dresses himself in a change of clothes. The old ones, too stained to be recovered, he burns. He pours himself a drink, whisky neat, and lets the dogs out of the lounge where he had shut them up. They mill around, tails wagging, and investigate with eager noses the mess that has been left on the floor. That will have to be cleaned with strong

chemicals. It will be the hardest piece of evidence to get rid of. God's-blood, even in this attenuated form, has a way of sticking around.

Then he thinks of the book. The thought sticks, intrusive in that unpleasant way of something externally imposed, of something not quite native to your own mind. Will drinks, shakes his head, hopes the combination of movement and alcohol burn will banish that idea back whence it came. No such luck. The possibility clings and lingers. What if? What if? There's so much in that book, there must be, so much knowledge that only Gods should know, surely there could be something in there that might help.

The jagged foreign thought seems less dangerous though than it used to. Is Will merely more confident now? Has killing the Godling given him that kind of arrogance? He knows better. And yet...

Hannibal had said there was something unusual about him, some power he had innately that he ought not have given his mortal blood. The Yith, Sutcliffe, had confirmed it. The God offers and offers, proffering secrets, proffering strength, making promises whose price remains hidden yet claiming that price to be easy to pay. He sees some horrible thing in Will, some horrible potential. He delights in Will's bloodlust, which Will can agree with when it is turned against the Royal line and all its get, but which he knows the God would also see turned again humans too, in the futures he loves best. Will refuses, refutes that utterly. He has killed one mortal man and he will not do that again.

But he will pay the price, sooner or later. Hannibal has sucked him deep into a world where the only way to survive is to give in. Will thought that by fighting and struggling he could pull himself out, but he has been fooling himself. It is too late for that. No, there is only one way left to win. When enemies offer you a weapon the only thing to do is to take it and learn how to use it so that you might turn it on them. If Hannibal gives him the Necronomicon then he will use it. If he sends him a beast that will fetch him cold iron he will use it. If he offers secrets and knowledge and power he will use it and then at the end Will will turn around and sink all of the power he has accumulated into the flesh of a God and end this once and for all.

He fetches the book and begins to read.

It feels less wrong in his hands than it did before.

Godling death comes too close these days. Beverly has seen much of it, minds it not, easy to compartmentalise and shut away, to think it will never happen to her. Focus efforts on finding killers, not worrying about their prey. Less easy to do so when the prey is known to you, when the illusion of safety wears thin. Paper thin. First that unknown corpse-stranger in Quantico itself – home-building, lair, sanctuary, *safe* made *unsafe* – now Matthew, colleague, Cthylla's distant get, broken and brutalised and built into a cage. Songbird singing no longer. Hawk in a trap.

How? Who? Why? Answering these questions is her job. Better to make a start on doing it than let words flit around her brain blocking better thoughts. She is not alone. Zzzeller is here, and Price, jokes withering in their mouths. Jack, a steady watchful presence. They are

waiting on Will Graham before they begin. Hannibal has been called to collect him. Will be bringing him from his home, not far away.

Not far away at all.

Beverly shudders. Not a pleasant thought that. Will is... she knows Will. Knows the shape of his mind. A strange mind certainly, but too full of mortal fear for the boldness of rebellion and revolution. Or is that merely the words of denial, not wanting to believe such a thing could be true of a friend... But here comes Will himself trailing a step behind Hannibal, that God wearing his false face. Will's gaze tracks the ground, avoidant. Bundled up warm against the cold, breath steaming the air. Heavy frames of glasses obscuring eyes and any emotions held therein.

He looks up. Beverly sees his mouth twist, but can't choose between pleasure or pain. Here, now, he is so hard to read.

“Will!” Jack is at his side in an instant, all over-eager. Must surely have the same thoughts, same doubts, as Beverly does. She knows Jack. His mind turns naturally to suspicion, a good trait in this line of work. He'll want to trip Will up. They'll all be watching him very close. “Good thing you hadn't left for work yet before Hannibal caught you. This sort of thing... Restorationist work, no doubt.”

It's Hannibal who speaks first though. “This is someone we know,” he says, stepping closer, leaning in to peer between the branches. Fascination, yes, that's the gleam of emotion in those flat blood-pools of eyes. Doubt twinges again, doubt and the sense – growing ever more familiar – that there is something hidden here that she is missing. The God continues; “Matthew, is it not, that young lad Cthylla sent. Fond of lurking in shadows. He asked few questions considering his reasons for being in your halls.”

“Whoever killed him took exception to that,” Will says with confidence. “Found his gaze... uncomfortable. So he took his eyes, turned his sight back on itself.”

“This bower...” Hannibal says, testing the spring of woven branches with a finger, not looking at Will who equally is avoiding looking at him. “Playing on the imagery of his phenotype? Or is our killer the type to put more thought into his rituals than simple surface interpretation?”

“Matthew transgressed his bounds. The killer put him in a cage where a beast belongs.”

Beverly is barely breathing. The God in false-skin hums, a pleased and thoughtful sound. What does he know? What hand does he have in this? What has Will done?

“Do you think you'll be able to draw up a profile on this man?” Jack asks. He interrupts the tension but does not break it. His voice seems to come as that of an interloper far off. “Given recent circumstances, we have to assume this was someone he knew.”

“Yes,” Will replies firmly, without the slightest trace of fear or guilt. “Someone from the FBI. Of course with the ratio of Godlings you have on staff that does serve to narrow it down considerably. You'll have to see who has access to the stores for iron cuffs.” He points when

this is met with confusion. Beverly looks closer. The shine of metal has been concealed beneath the patina of ash and char, but no, there it remains, deadly and poisonous and foul. She grits her teeth. Cold iron. If everything she fears is true, then how did Will get his hands on those?

“For the moment then, we shall leave your team to their work,” Hannibal tells Jack, rejoining Will and placing a hand on his shoulder, one which Will would clearly prefer to shrug off. “I shall help Will see the face of this killer.”

What, by looking in the mirror, Beverly thinks, as her stomach churns. Not like her to be anxious, not like a Godling to know fear. But if Will has shed ichor, has done this, then everything she knows of him is wrong. What else might she be wrong about?

Will thinks Hannibal is so pleased he might purr. The God has been like this ever since he turned up on Will's doorstep that morning with a summons from Jack to a crime-scene of Will's own making, and his own message of congratulations.

“My darling boy...” Hannibal begins, but Will interrupts him.

“I did none of this for you,” he says. “You forced my hand, but that's what you wanted from the beginning. That's why you did nothing before. But the decision was mine, his death was mine, and what I did to him after is mine. You set the events in motion but don't take too much credit for the outcome.”

“Will, I would not be so bold as to reap rewards that are not my right to take,” Hannibal replies. “I am merely very proud of you. You are my Prophet – might I not at least have that?”

“I'd rather you didn't have anything of mine, my very self included.”

Hannibal makes no reply to that, except to look quietly pleased. Self-satisfied in a knowing sort of way. This is, after all, what the God had been hoping would happen. Will reminds himself that he is not giving in, he is just picking his battles, waiting for a better time to fight. The thought is not really comforting. He'd felt better last night. More sure and certain in his purpose. Had he just been high on the thrill of shedding Golding blood?

“What will you do now Will?” Hannibal asks him, before the silence grows too long.

“When they've eliminated even the slightest lead that could take them away from the obvious you mean?” The fear is back. He has lived with it too long for it to be driven away so easily. But it is a thin shadow of the agony of its former self. He can step away from it, leave it in the background, churning in the shadows and never stepping into the light. “When they can no longer wilfully blind themselves to the fact that I am the only possible suspect, if in fact they do so at all?”

Hannibal inclines his head, smiling ever-so-slightly.

“Well I'm not going to beg for your help, if that's what you're asking,” Will says. He is longing for a drink of something strong. That would make everything oh so much easier, wouldn't it.

“I hadn't thought you suicidal Will.”

Will bares his teeth. Not really a smile. “I thought all of this was about figuring things out for myself Hannibal. That's what you want, isn't it? Your strong, wilful, clever puppet. You gave me the book. And now I'll use it.”

Does the God look impressed? No, that's wishful thinking on Will's part. But he's certainly not displeased with what Will is telling him.

“In that case it would certainly be very wrong of me to stand in your way,” Hannibal says. “I do look forward to seeing how you solve this particular puzzle.”

For his part Will only hopes that everything goes to plan. The false trail is already laid. Now he needs somebody to attach the loose end to.

Abigail has been slowly making herself at home since moving into her God's abode several months ago. The psychiatric hospital had its uses, she supposes, and as often as Hannibal took her through strange roads outwith its walls she had not felt trapped by being there. The company had been... tolerable. Alana the almost-God had visited her a few times. Her life there had been settling into a kind of routine. But she is glad to be out all the same.

No-one raised any eyebrows when her God, in his thin-blood skin, said that he was taking her home. He was still a Godling, still possessed of some rights, even in that form. He had filled out the appropriate paper-work, and Abigail had obviously not made any objections. The hospital were simply glad that someone so supportive would be overseeing her re-integration into the world – since as far as they knew no enterprising Royalty had come looking for a suitably traumatised servant during her time with them.

Since then she has been at liberty to do almost whatever she wants, a kind of freedom which is both heady and also a little scary. Her parents had never been as lenient as that, and neither had the hospital. Now she can go out, walk around Baltimore, go shopping – although she is always careful how she spends her money. It belongs to her God in the end, not to her. Hannibal's house is like a dream, full of dark spaces, curious rooms, corridors, hide-aways... bigger inside than out. She can feel the weight of space folded up between its walls. She is forever finding new and interesting books, trinkets, objects of greater and lesser power...

But the best thing about her new home is learning how to hunt for herself. Abigail has outgrown the simplicity of having sacrifices handed to her for her knife to deliver, now she is to find those sacrifices for herself, choose them with attention paid to their significance, to their suitability. Thus far she has kept things simple and relied upon guidance from Hannibal himself before acting. But she has been compiling a folder of possibilities, of research done into a number of people who she thinks might just fit the criteria.

One method she has been using involves paying close attention to Baltimore's various local newspapers. Although murder in itself is not a crime per se, murder without permission certainly is. Mortals do not have the right to take the lives of other mortals. Only the Gods, in their great wisdom, know whose souls are best given into their service through death. A human can only waste that death, or worse, steal power from those who need it to protect their great flock. Yet there are always those arrogant enough to commit that crime anyway, and what better way for them to pay for that than with their lives?

On this particular morning Abigail opens the *Tattler* – always a useful source on interesting murders great and small – to find a report, with pictures, about an utter failure of a ritual. A dead mortal woman sewn into the womb of a horse, a live starling in her throat. A complete mixture of intent and symbolism, it would never have worked. Abigail herself isn't sure if the goal was to put the woman's soul into the bird, or to bring her back to life in her old body, so how the power being invoked was meant to tell... who knows. After so much painstaking instruction from her God, to see something done so poorly is almost physically painful.

Thus far the police have no leads. Freddie Lounds is quite scathing about that fact. Abigail wonders how that can be. Even though their crime scene team can't be as skilled as that of the FBI, normally basic psychic divining at the site can dredge *something* up. But it if did, here, it wasn't anything useful. Or they really aren't trying very hard at all.

There's something about this particular case that has her curious. She thinks Hannibal might be curious as well. But it would be best if she did some digging of her own first, before going to him with this. It will show her independence of his help, show her worthiness. Abigail tears the page out of the paper and folds it up neatly. She'll go to the stables, pretend to be interested in riding lessons, take the opportunity to snoop around and ask a few questions. If she can get a moment alone, it can't hurt to try a little divining of her own either.

Black Briar Stables, a name and a location and that'll be enough to find it in the directory. Then she can call them up to make an appointment. She's confident it will be a worthwhile use of her patron's money.

Everything that Beverly had found at the scene of Matthew's death had only served to muddy the waters. She's been very careful with her examination, stretched out every sense, licked and lapped into every psychic corner and found... nothing. No trace of human, no trace of Will Graham. Only bitter death and more bitter iron. Only fear and awe. Could a mortal prompt that emotion in a Godling at the moment of death?

All she has is more questions. If this was Will, which she hopes with all she is it was not, then he shouldn't be able to hide the traces of his presence. No human should, not without help. Thinking this, remembering the look on Hannibal's face... Can she even risk that thought? Press around it, careful, careful.

'I have no need for a Prophet.' And he has always taken an interest in Will.

But even he wouldn't let Will kill a Godling on his behalf, not like this, in secret, in the dark, without going through channels, getting permission. Blood is blood. Ichor is ichor. You might

eat your own, but out in the open, strength against strength, and let none *but* you do so.

It must be something else.

Jimmy and Zzzeller have not had any more luck than she has. On Jack's orders they checked Will's house and found just as much nothing. There is *no trail* here. Nothing to hunt. Frustration bites and burns. Even checking the armoury at Quantico shows all the cuffs accounted for. The pair wrapped round Matthew's wrists is none of theirs, and untraceable besides that, no makers mark, no serial number. This is smoke in the wind. Fog under the sun. Snow in springtime.

They have no suspects and no leads, and soon enough, Cthylla is going to want answers.

The visit to the stables is fruitful, sort of, but not in the way that Abigail expected. She enjoys the lesson itself, the warm solid mass of the pony beneath her, the motion of its breathing, its hooves hitting the packed earth of the riding ring as it takes its placid slow paces around and around. Before, with her parents, they never would have had the money for something like this and she was never horsey enough as a child for it to matter. But now she has all the money she could want, so long as she can justify to herself how she spends it. After she finishes, changes back into her comfortable trainers and puts the hat and high boots away, is easy enough to slip away unnoticed. Hannibal has taught her ways to remain unseen, charms and cantrips and the ways of behaving unobtrusively that will allow those to take hold. No-one notices her going back to the stables.

A needle made from a dagger that has tasted blood can be made to show the way to other deaths. Abigail follows hers, stuck through a piece of cork in a bucket of water, to the last stable at the end of the row and finds it empty, fresh straw thrown on the floor, signs of recent cleaning. Of course the body – bodies – are long gone. That's alright. She came expecting that.

Abigail put down the pail, making sure to retrieve the needle and put it away again safe, then pulls off her backpack and goes about the business of setting up a circle. She doesn't have much power available to her as a human, but even before the Gods returned, mortals had their ways of reaching out to something greater than themselves for aid. Circles, rituals, all these secret signs and ciphers and runes; they draw power from the universe, they concentrate what power is there. And that will let you do things that Gods can do at a glance.

So she draws in blood and clay and oil, she chants in tongues whose history stretches back through accreted and fossilised ages of years, she feels the sense of the world as a thing far stranger and larger than she in all her smallness can know and she asks. What happened here?

What comes is... a muddle. A flash of images. Sensations. Sorrow. A body, familiar, lax, waxy, dead. A throat with a necklace of bruising. A horse's whicker, soft. Skin against horse-hair, like velvet. Dark pools of brown eyes, watching with animal intelligence. Fear. Sadness. A desire to help. Compassion, in heaving waves, so, so much of it. A dying breath, then flesh, wet, raw, red, opening. The smell, ripe, coppery. The pull of heavy thread, wet with blood. Hands, covered, sticky, prickling as it dries and flakes.

There's no connection between each flash. Senses are distant from each other. Touch does not link to sight does not link to smell, to taste. There's no string of events to follow, no chain to show exactly what went on in this stable all those nights ago except that whoever tried to bring that woman back with the ritual he didn't understand was not the one who killed her.

So? What now, Abigail asks herself. She came here hoping to find someone fit for the appetite of her God. This person, whoever they are, is fit enough for Royal interest all right, but not what Hannibal likes. He tries to fix mortal minds, not play with them or devour them. So it seems that she will go away disappointed except that... Someone human did kill Sarah Kraeber, someone this other man was afraid of. Someone she *could* kill, perhaps, so that this isn't all a lot of wasted effort.

But there's only one person she can think of who could make any sense of what she just saw. Much as she hates to admit it. Will Graham. She's going to have to get over the man's ungratefulness and talk to Will Graham.

Will is... surprised, to say the least, when he opens his door late one afternoon to find that his unexpected visitor is Abigail. For a long moment he says nothing and neither does she. It's awkward, to say the least. Eventually she glares and says, “Aren't you going to invite me in?” Will stands aside. Memories not his own tickle him; the ghost of a consuming love, the eidolon of Garret Jacob Hobbs and all his monstrosity. The emotions Will took as his own hunting that man, made all the more his in the moment when he took that life, steadfast through bloodshed. Much has happened since then. It feels like another life. Abigail is Hannibal's Priestess through and through, the fact of which is a barrier thrown up between them.

“Abigail...” he says, and then can't find any words to follow that one, half plea, half demand.

“I'm here because I want your help,” Abigail says, biting her lip. She is no more at ease than he is. Will can feel it in her, hesitancy, trepidation, wariness. She has chosen the path of true belief and distrusts that he has not, that at every step he rejects what to her is the best and greatest gift one can be given in this life. Instinct is to blame her for that submission but instinct wars with all that Hobbs left behind. Protectiveness has never left his heart, where Abigail is concerned.

“Something to drink?” he offers her, leading her through to the kitchen, tsking at his dogs when they become over-eager in their excitement to make a new friend. No wariness in them. Not that Abigail fears them, but dogs are rare enough in this world that she has little idea how to react to them.

“No thanks,” Abigail replies. “I just want to tell you about this, and then we can meet up again later if you agree.” In other words, let's get this over with. Will nods, sits down at the table.

“How can I help?”

Abigail tells him. Tells him about mortal death, about a ritual, about impressions strange and disjointed that she could make head nor tail of. Tells him that there is a man who deserves to die and that she needs Will to find him for her.

There are no prizes for guessing whose ends this killer's death would further. It is sacrifice-hunting Abigail goes, but she is right about one thing at least. Humans killing humans is an abomination, is something that demands justice. But justice at the end of a hungry knife? Isn't this just Hobbs all over again? Will got into the line of work he did just so he wouldn't be involved in this kind of case, just so there would be no chance that he would shed human blood. He is not one of *them*.

But. This is Abigail asking. And if he doesn't like what he sees, he will lie and tell her that he cannot find the man she is looking for. It seems safe enough.

“Yes,” he tells her, and is rewarded with her smile. “When do you want us to go there?”

Will finds himself able to read what has been left behind at Black Briar Stables easily enough. After ever-growing experience of looking into the minds of Godlings, a less that ordinary human is not so much of a challenge. He has a face, he has a sense of self, he has the images of a home. There cannot be many animal shelters in this part of the state. The concept is not the kind of kindness Royalty has much interest in. He opens his eyes, lets the images drain away, and tells Abigail what he has seen.

“So if we find him, talk to him, he'll lead us to the real killer?” she asks.

Will nods. “He knows. I can feel the fear in him. The shadow on his back. And I know where we can find him.”

“Can we go now?”

Will thinks. They came to the stables early, so as to have plenty of time here after Abigail's lesson. The rest of the afternoon stretches out before them, and their quarry cannot be far, not to have come and gone here with a body, not with animals to feed and exercise and muck out. “Yes,” he says. “We'll just need to have a quick look in the directory.”

Abigail produces one from her bag. Always prepared. Will wonders if that is something Hannibal is teaching her. He takes it and flicks through it, cheap paper rough under his fingertips. It's not hard to find. As he'd thought, it must be the only one of its kind in a hundred miles. A telephone number. An address.

Abigail is quiet during the drive, seemingly content to stare out the window at the bare trees, the drifts of snow brushing the fields, piled up at the sides of the road. The sky is grey under a dome of thin cloud, with the sun showing half-way through as a pale ball in the heavens. Winter seems fast-encroaching this year. When they make the turn that leads up to the shelter, set up in the remains of an old farm, the trail is free of tracks, earth hard-packed with the cold, dusted with a thin layer of white.

There's a barn, and a black horse in a paddock outside. It comes trotting up to the fence as they approach, and Abigail reaches out to let it snuffle at her hand, pats it on the nose. Will is reminded of the stag, of the quiet strength of its muscles held passive under his palm. He turns away and tries the door. It isn't locked.

Inside is a sudden cacophony of animal screeches, barks, yelps, as these two intruders invade their territory. Cages are stacked everywhere. There are birds, dogs, cats, even a monkey visible just from where Will is standing. Of the owner of all this, there is no immediate sign. No one comes to investigate. But there is someone there, standing behind all that wire and wood. A thin man, hunched and turned away, scruffy and unkempt. Will approaches him cautiously. It's like approaching a wild animal, like one of his strays.

“Peter Bernadone?” he asks, the name pulled to his lips from the flashes of the man himself, from everything he left behind at Black Briar.

“Thought maybe someone... maybe someone whoulda come by now,” Peter says, his voice a frail, uncertain thing. He takes glances at them out of the corners of his eyes, each movement of his body jerky, uncoordinated.

“Someone from the police?” Will asks gently.

Peter nods. To look inside him – which Will does instinctively, as he would with any suspect, with any case – is to see a mirror of what he'd seen before; a man whose senses are torn apart from one another, always working away at cross-purposes, without ever congealing into a cohesive whole. There's a white scar stretching across the side of his head, just visible cutting through the wild hair. Brain damage. An atypical motor response.

“We're not from the police,” Will says. “But we are here to help. My name's Will Graham. This is Abigail. You knew Sarah Kraeber, didn't you?”

“I knew... I knew her.”

“You found her. You brought her to Black Briar. You were grieving for her.” Will can practically taste it, sour as vinegar. Pain tinged with anger, with that helpless rage that Will has felt so often in a thousand different ways, from within and without. In the corner Abigail stays silent, listening. Watching him work. Can she feel it in the air, with what new senses her priesthood has gifted her? Is his own empathy detectable as something that reaches out, or as a well into which everything else sinks in?

“There was a bird,” Peter says, forcing out the words. “The bird alive?”

“I'm sorry Peter, I don't know. I'll find out.” It won't contain her soul. The ritual wasn't focused enough for that. But as he speaks he sense that Peter doesn't believe it does. It's about a different kind of comfort.

“I hope she is, I hope... I couldn't help the horse but I could maybe... maybe help the bird.”

Will lets the silence stretch. Feeling his way along the threads of conversation, following instinct. When to speak, when to let his body speak for him. This is new, this *knowing*.

Perhaps just because it is only the two of them talking. Time was, he never knew what to say, how to act, when to be animated, when to be still. Perhaps fear preyed on his nerves so much he never knew how how to pay attention. God-killing must be good for something.

“I didn't... I didn't kill anyone, I...” Peter says.

“I know that,” Will replies softly, “but you knew where to find Sarah, afterwards. How did you know that?”

“Sarah, she was always speaking to me. Now she's gone... she's everywhere and nowhere.” He's afraid. It smells like sweat, feels like ice against skin, like a knife in the gut. But Will can feel that he wants to talk. It will only take a push.

“Tell me who killed her.”

He gives them a name. Will sees Abigail out of the corner of his eye, taking a notebook from her bag and writing it down. Satisfaction, sweet and dark as chocolate, spins out of her.

“We're going to make sure that this doesn't happen again,” Will reassures him. “And I'll let you know, about the bird.”

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